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WESTERN ACTION

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Volume 9 ★ February, 1945 ★ Number 4

VITAL NEW COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

GUN-SLAMMER'S RANGE.....By Lee Floren 10

Web Drummond's owlhoot days were over; he'd gone straight for a long time and become a respected and respectable member of the community. But now other younger men were riding the out-trails with their eyes on Drummond's holdings. And Web knew that only his nephew, Len, could help — if Len would come to his black-sheep uncle's aid!

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. . . when you know what brand of oil will loosen up their check-writing fingers!

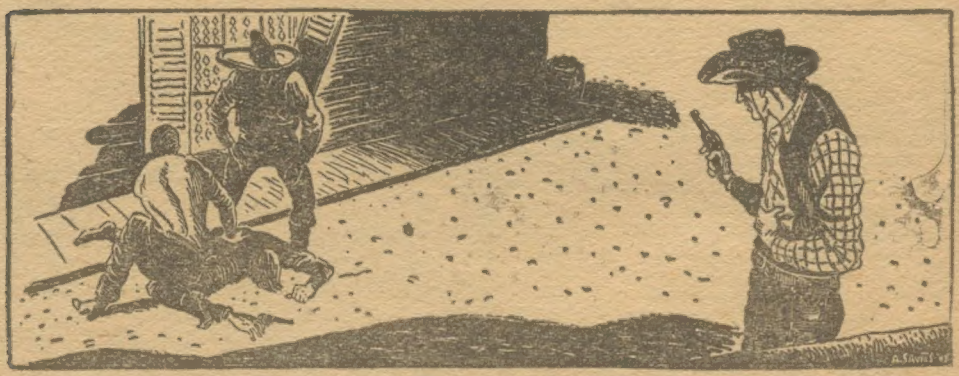
RUSTLIN' FOR ROMANCE .....By Archie Joscelyn 85

Two-Ton Tompkins was enough to drive a drunkard to water!

THE KID COMES HOME.....By Leo Hoban 98

Young Bob found out what a man don't know can hurt him plenty!

Cover by H. W. Scott *Robert W. Lowndes, Editor*



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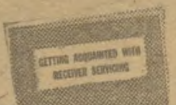

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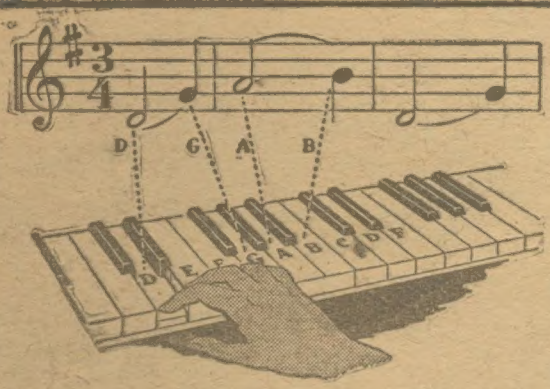

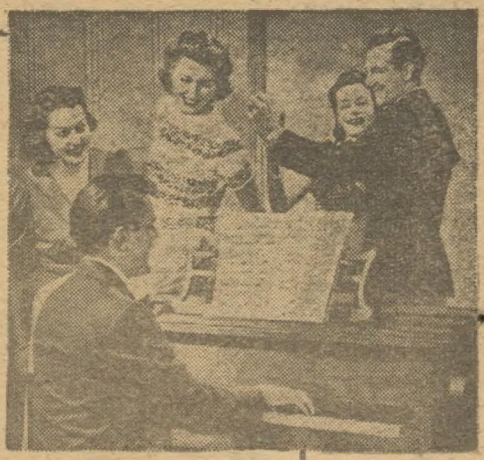

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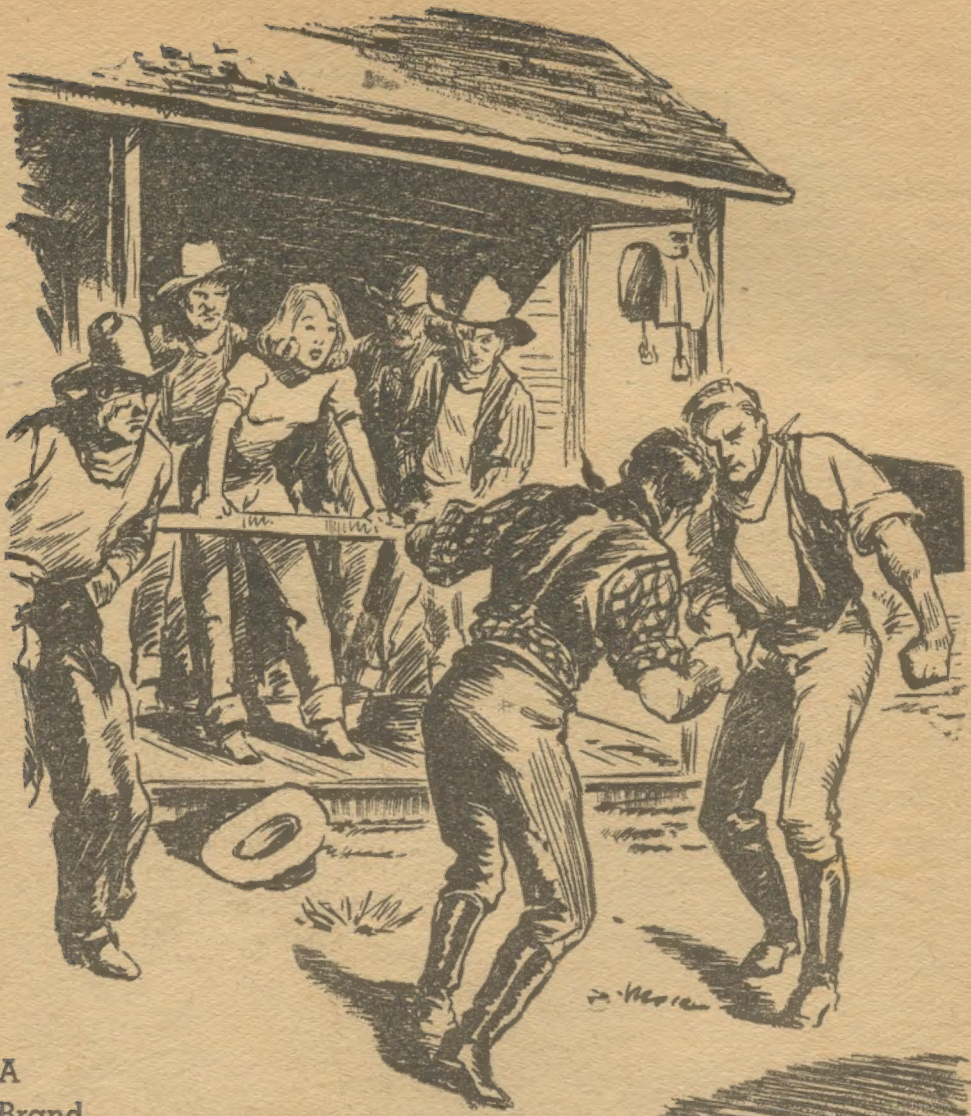

A
Brand
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GUN-SLAMMER'S RANGE

By Lee Floren

(Author of "The Boothill Buckaroo," "Judge Bates, Coyote Catcher," etc.)

Len Drummond knew that trouble was up when he received a note from his ex-owlhoot Uncle, Web Drummond. But it wasn't until another man was shot down in cold blood, under the impression that he was Len, that Drummond realized how much was at stake!

CHAPTER I

THE road angled through the badlands, looking like a tired snake curled under the hot noon sun. It was full of rough spots and wagon-ruts but yet, despite the jouncing and swaying of the heavy Concord stage, the fat man was asleep, his thick body slowly sliding at a slant across the leather seat. Len Drummond had moved into

"Just don't anyone reach for their guns," said Latigo amiably as the two men fought.

the corner as far as possible but finally the obese man's head came to an ultimate rest on Drummond's wide right shoulder. Drummond glanced down at the beefy face and the odor of the man's breath caused him to smill wryly at the girl across from him.

"Never figured I'd play wet-nurse to a whiskey-soaked salesman, but I can't move no farther." His smile grew. "Unless I come over an' sit on your lap."

Drummond waited to see how the girl would take his remarks. She had been on the stage when he had boarded it at Denver. For over eight hundred miles she had kept her thoughts—and her voice—to herself. She was pretty and clean, and Drummond's life had taken him on trails devoid of women—let alone pretty women, and clean women.

Her voice was chilly. "I'm not in the habit of holding strangers on my lap, and besides, you're too big. Why don't you go up and ride with the driver?"

The thin man, seated beside the girl, let a smile touch his lips. Drummond saw that smile start, saw its cynicism, and anger touched him momentarily. Drummond's eyes left the thin man and returned to the girl.

"I did that for three hundred miles or so. Funny thing about scenery. Once you've seen a few hundred miles of it after that it looks the same." He looked at the thin man. "Ain't that right, fellow?"

The thin man said quietly, "I reckon so."

The girl resumed her job of looking out the window. They were in the badlands now, and Drummond figured they were about forty miles from the end of the line, the town of Cottonwood. He rolled a cigaret and studied the girl over the flame of his stick.

She was about twenty, he figured—four years younger than himself. Her eyes were dark and deep. Her hair, too, was dark, sleek as a raven's wing. A perky black hat, small and tidy, had a long ebony plume that curled down to touch her back. Her dress was of black silk, flaring at the hips and running down to her tiny feet. The only flash of white was her snowy jabot that filled the front of her tight black coat. She made Drummond think of a bird; a saucy blackbird, bright and nimble and quick. There was character in her but it was buried deep.

The thin man spoke. He jabbed a long thumb at the sleeping drummer. "Where did the fat boy climb on this ol' tub?"

Drummond paused for a while before answering. He didn't like this lank man; the stranger was too cynical, too tight of lip, too secretive. He had boarded the Concord forty miles back at Circle. His face was lean and hard; his eyes were too level. And the two .45s, Drummond noticed, were tied tightly to his lean hips.

"Back in Miles City," said Drummond.

THE lank man nodded. "Prob'ly caught the N. P. train into there." He closed up suddenly. Drummond had the impression that the man had not meant to say that much.

"You know him?" asked Drummond.

The man looked at Drummond for a long moment. "No," he finally said.

Drummond decided to carry the conversation further. "Wonder what he's got in his bag?" He studied the leather grip at the man's feet.

The girl spoke. "Probaably distilled water colored with nectar and some boric acid. Selling it for a cure-all; you know, good for man and beast. We used to see them down in Texas, too. I guess they make a precarious living."

Drummond nodded. He knew this, then—the girl was from Texas. What, he wondered, was bringing her up into this northern Montana country? He was debating that when the thin man spoke.

"Maybe," said the man, "he ain't a drummer. . . "

Drummond wondered what the man meant by that. The girl resumed looking out the dusty window. Drummond also glanced outside: the

badlands were brittle under the sun; they were all colors—red and indigo and blue. At one time, far back in those prehistoric ages, nature and wind and water had combined their efforts, bringing out this dash of color, this symphony of blending. But Drummond, noting this harsh beauty, had no eyes for it.

He shifted to a more comfortable position, his long body aching from the long trip. He wished, now, he had ridden up from Colorado; in a way, he wished he had not come at all. His face was graven and calm as he faced this thought. But he had faced it before, on the tedious trip north, and the answer had always been the same—his uncle Web had written for him to come, and there had been urgency in Web's letter.

Drummond wondered what was in the wind.

Web was not such a type as to sit down and write the letter without being prompted by a great need—or, for that matter, a great fear. Drummond dwelt on this thought: he reconstructed the past, and found no flavor for his tongue.

* * *

Web was his father's brother, and Web had known wild ways. Web's trail had been long and dark and blood had dripped into the dust. Drummond had felt that when he was a child, when Web and his men had ridden in on those dark wild nights—those nights that had been interspersed by many days. When, out of the shadows and the night, there would come into the house this hard dark man—come without sound or trace of his coming. Come with his guns and his darkness and the smile on his brittle lips.

"My men," he would say, "are out in the brush. The law is pressin' us close, Jim. We gotta hole up until this thing blows over. The law is only a good day's ride behind us and Smoky has a bullet in his guts."

Jim Drummond would look at his brother, this man of the dim trails. And in Jim Drummond's eyes would be that look of remorse. He would say, in his slow voice, "I thought I told you never to come back, Web."

Web had spread his thick hands—those hands that, despite their chubbiness, could handle a gun so quickly. "Just this once, Jim."

Len Drummond's father had turned to his wife. There was no remorse in the pioneer woman's eyes; there was anger, and her voice had showed it.

"*Just this once, Jim.* That's what he said the last time, wasn't it? Yes, you hid him and his gang, and the law has looked aslant at you since that day. Jim, if they catch you, it means prison. Or—" Her voice held sorrow now. "—it means that you take to the life of the gun like this, your brother!"

"But he's my brother," Jim Drummond had remarked, softly. "Go back into the hills, Web. I'll get food to you. An' medical supplies."

"An' some bullets too," reminded Web Drummond.

WHEN Len had grown older, time had revealed the secret to him. The name of the Gibson gang—the gang that had robbed the U. P. and the Texas towns—came to him, and gradually he understood that Hank Gibson, the gang's leader, had in reality been his uncle, Web Drummond.

Some eight years before, the Gibson gang had dropped out of sight—disappeared as though the earth, on some rainy storm-filled night, had opened and swallowed it, leaving no living members of the notorious midnight riders—only memories and legends that, with the passage of time and its exaggeration in men's memories, created legends and truths and half-truths across the southwest. Once Len Drummond had asked his father if he knew what had become of Web.

Jim Drummond had shook his head. "God knows and God does not speak to mortals. Maybe he read the handwriting on the wall and drifted to South America. Maybe some lone grave on some mountain peak holds his remains."

Soon after that, Jim Drummond had followed his wife into the grave, and Len had moved into a man's life, following the trailherds, fighting and living in that raw, untamed wilderness. Then had come that letter to Denver—a bold, heavily scrawled letter—a letter that somehow, despite the fact that Len had moved so rapidly, managed to reach him. The postmark was of six months in age and bore the stamp of the Cottonwood, Montana, office. It had been signed Hank. Just Hank. But Drummond had seen behind the simple signature, and understood. . .

Why his uncle had sent for him, Drummond did not know, and he would not know until the stage had reached Cottonwood. But Len was sure of this: Web Drummond was in trouble and that trouble was very pressing, or else he would not have sent that message. For Web was a man who would see things through to the bitter end; only in cases of extreme need, would he ask for aid. Len realized, with a start, that he had not seen his uncle for over ten years.

* * *

Len Drummond built in his mind his last recollection of his uncle. The picture was sketchy; three elements stood out. Web Drummond had been husky and tough; his legs had been bowed to the saddle, his hands fitted to gun-grips. But Len Drummond knew that there had once been a time when that hand had been fitted, not to the handle of a Colts, but to the pen.

Drummond ground his cigar under heel on the coach's floor. That part was hard to believe; it was too incongruous. But Web Drummond had been educated in the East and taken to banking. He had been one of Chicago's up-and-coming young bankers, but his greed had been his downfall. There had been loose money around and he took it, covering his shortages for a year; that act had been discovered, and it was the basis of his uncle's trail of the gun.

DRUMMOND smiled then, thinking of the way Fate deals with men. The drummer's head had lopped over and Drummond took it, moving the man's heavy head back against the seat. The drummer kept on breathing heavily. The thin man spoke drily.

"You'll be drunk from his breath by the time you reach Cottonwood, stranger." He was driving after something and Drummond did not know what it was. The thin man leaned forward and studied the drummer's bag; there was no printing on it. The thin man tried to make his voice too level; that gave him away.

"Wonder what fat boy's name is?"

Drummond said, "I don't know," and looked at the girl. "Do you?"

"No I don't. And what's more, I don't care to know."

The lanky man smiled then, an emotionless quirk of sardonic lips. Drummond had an idea that the man wanted to find out something. Drummond played with him; he, too, was curious. But his curiosity did not concern the fat man; it was centered on the lanky hairpin.

"He got anythin' in his coat pocket?"

Drummond said, "I'm not used to goin' through a stranger's pockets."

The man leaned over and thumbed back the drummer's slack coat, glancing at the inside pocket. He took a few papers from it and thumbed through them.

"No name there," he said.

"When he got on the coach in Miles City," the girl said, "somebody called him by name, but I don't remember what it was."

The man looked at her. "Did they call him Drummond?"

"No," she said. Her brow furrowed. "I don't remember. Maybe it was Drummond."

Drummond leaned his head back, his eyes slightly lidded. Tides of emotion were sweeping the rocky shores of his curiosity. He was glad, then, he had never mentioned his name to the girl, nor, for that matter, did he know hers. This thin gent was a gunman; his personality, his guns. told that. And, Drummond knew, the

man had boarded the stage for some ulterior purpose.

Drummond thought, "He's looking for me. But why?" He thought he would open the conversation again, then dismissed it. He did not want to make this man too suspicious; he would know then of his error.

There was silence then but for the thunder of the horses' hoofs, the creaking of the stage. A few miles limped by, hot and dusty. The dust sifted through the closed windows; the girl brushed it from her dress.

"Oh, I wish we were in Cottonwood," she said.

The lanky man said, "We'll be there soon. Only about ten miles away." He glanced at the outside terrain. "Soon we'll be in Eagle Rock canyon. We're enterin' it now."

The drag of the canyon road slowed the stage down slowly. Finally the horses fell to a trot; the trot died, became a walk, then a plod. Here buckbrush and scrub-pine grew thick on the steep sides. When the stage was almost to the summit, three mounted men, their faces covered by bandannas, rode out of the brush, their guns level in their fists. The one shot, fired over the driver's head, brought the team and stage to a halt. The drummer jerked suddenly awake and stared at Drummond, his eyes wide in surprise.

"What's happenin'?"

Drummond said quietly, "A hold-up, fella."

THE salesman's moon-face went pale and Drummond looked at the girl. Her eyes were calm but he noticed her knuckles were white against her black handbag. The thin man's hatchet-face was without any emotion.

"This stop," said the thin man, "isn't on the time-table."

"The stage carrying anything of value?" asked the girl. "That is, outside of our and the driver's personal effects?"

The thin man said, "These gents aren't after plunder. There's no gold on this stage anyway." He had a .45 in his hands now. "Get out, all of you! You too, mister fat man!"

"Inside play, huh?" breathed Drummond.

"You can call it that."

The girl went first, stepping into the dust, handbag in one hand, holding her skirts in the other. The thin man ordered Drummond out next. The salesman started out, leaving his bag behind; the gunman made him continue, picking up the bag himself.

"There's only samples in there," said the drummer. "I got to use them in my business."

"Get out," the man grunted.

They lined up along the stage under the guns of the three riders and the thin man. The thin man passed the bag up to the leader, a tall, wide-shouldered man who sat a roan gelding. "You'll find your stuff in here, fella," he said.

"Which one is Drummond?" the leader asked.

"The fat fella, there." The thin man smiled. "He tried to pull a fast one on us, comin' in disguised as a prune-hound."

The salesman said, huskily, "My name ain't Drummond, it's—"

The leader cut him short with, "No use tryin' to lie, fella." His gun spat four times and the .45 bucked against his hand. The bullets hit the drummer in the chest and head. His obese body crumpled; his knees sprang apart. He toppled into the dust, lying on his side, his head askew under his shoulders.

The leader blew the smoke from his gun and said, "There's a horse tied in the brush for you, Lanky. You've got half of your pay—t'other half's in your saddle-bags. Now light out an' forgit what you jus' saw. If I ever catch you in this Milk river country again I'm shootin' you on sight."

"I'll never come back."

"Make damned sure of that!"

The thin man sheathed his gun and turned to walk into the brush. When his back was turned a second bandit, twisting his gun sidewise, shot once. One shot was enough. The bullet snapped the thin man's spine and dropped him like a log. The bandit turned frosty eyes on his leader.

"Now I know he'll never talk," he said smoothly.

DRUMMOND felt rage pour through him. He had been on the verge of disclosing the fact that his name was Drummond but the bandit had shot the drummer before he could speak. For some strange reason these men had wanted to kill him and, if they had not mistaken the salesman for him, he would have been dead now, shot down without a chance.

His calm face hiding his thoughts, he studied the three masked men, but knew he could never recognize them. They had no outstanding characteristics or markings. Each wore common range-garb—unpolished boots, Levis, heavy shirts and brush jumpers. They had smeared the brands of their horses over with pitch. Their gear was every-day cowpuncher gear—roughed-up saddles, common leather headstalls and plain blue-steel bits with split latigo reins. Drummond let his eyes rest on the leader's roan.

Evidently the animal had passed through many hands; four brands, judging from the pitch smears, graced its tough hide. Two brands were on each shoulder, one on the right flank, and a jawbrand on the left jaw. Drummond stored the jawbrand into his memory; few horses were branded on the jaw.

Of the men's faces, he could tell nothing. The bandannas hid too much. He glanced at the girl. The sight of the brutality had shaken her, but she was pulling herself together through sheer force of will.

One man said, "How about the rest of these pumpkin rollers, chief?"

The leader's cold eyes stopped on Drummond. They moved over him and catalogued him. They stopped at his gunless thighs.

"You goin' into Cottonwood?"

Drummon nodded.

"A tough town," murmured the man, "an' you should have guns. . . Or maybe you're jus' travelin' through?"

"Maybe I am. . ." Drummond added, "An' maybe I ain't." He did not tell him that his guns were in the stage. That their weights had been heavy on this hot day and he had taken them off.

"Frosty hairpin," said the leader. He switched his harsh eyes to the girl and Drummond saw them appraise her. "Purty little filly. You got anythin' in that bag?"

"You'll have to fight to get it," she said.

A soft laugh came from behind the mask. "Look in the coach," the leader said. One man reined his horse close and saw Drummond's guns. He reached through the open window without leaving his saddle and took them. Drummond's eyes were pinpoints and he said, "I wouldn't take them if I was you, mister."

"Why not?"

"I'll know them guns anywhere I see them."

The man looked at his boss. "You don't have to wear them," the leader said. "Take them, fella. We ain't stoppin' no bullet in our back when we ride away from here." He spoke to the other man. "Take the rifle an' shortgun off'n that driver. Then get Lanky's guns an' we'll drift outa here pronto."

The weapons gathered, they whirled their horses and rode into the high brush. Drummond stood there, listening to their retreating hoofs, judging the distance and direction. He was grave and steady but anger was with him. Finally the hoofs died and the only sound was the clamping of one of the stage horses. Drummond looked up at the silent stage driver.

"You know this country," he said; "could I get a bronc an' gun aroun' close?"

"You aim to foller them?"

Drummond smiled. "You could call it that."

"Why, hell, you're a stranger—"

Drummond turned and looked at the dead salesman. "You see that fellow lyin' there?" he asked quietly. "He died in my place. You see, his name isn't Drummond; but mine is."

The driver spat and said shakily, "Man, you had a narrow escape," and the girl's breath came in with a jerk.

She looked at Drummond, and her eyes were chipped stone. She said, "An' you let him die?"

Drummond spread his hands. "I didn't have time to say a word, lady. I-was jus' goin' to speak when he cut him down. After that there was no percentage in tellin' who I was. If I had, I'd be dead by now."

"But you could have—"

Drummond said, "That's enough, lady. How about it, driver? Where can I get hold of a gun an' a bronc?"

"OL' Sid Hunter lives down under yonder ravine." The man designated across space to the north. "He should have a handy hoss an' he raises good stock. I got a rifle." He tied his reins around the brake-handle and pulled up the lid on the strong-box. He came out with a Winchester, jacked it open and kicked out a shell, slammed a new shell into the barrel, and put the other into the magazine. He tossed the rifle and a box of shells to Drummond. "But you oughta go into town with me, stranger. That's Sheriff Harry Carter's job, not yours."

"It's me who's doin' it," said Drummond.

The man shrugged and climbed to the ground. "Help me tote these dead men inside. I can't handle 'em alone." He and Drummond loaded the dead men in the stage. The girl made to enter, then halted.

"I'll ride up with you," she told the driver.

The man said, "That'll be best, miss."

Drummond looked at her and said quietly, "I'm sorry you had to see this, miss. I'm really sorry."

The anger had left her eyes now. But the terror was still there, lurking close to the surfaces. She curtsied and the act, seemingly out of place on this mountain road, held the background of good breeding, of education. Again Drummond thought of a black, ebony bird—sleek and smooth and silken.

"I lost my head slightly," she said shakily. "But I guess that's a woman's born privilege, is it not, Mr Drummond."

He smiled. "It is."

Her smooth forehead curved upward and she said, "But why do you go? If you catch them—and I hope you don't—they will only kill you, for it is three against one. Why not let the law take its course?"

Drummond said, "This isn't Texas, ma'am. Texas is old compared with this country; the law is a shaky thing here. A man died because he was mistaken for me. And besides," he was smiling a little too tightly, "they took my guns."

"But you can buy others."

He said, "My father gave me those guns. . ."

CHAPTER II

THE STAGE left and Drummond turned into the brush. He knew that the bandits had not left a horse for the thin man. That had been only an excuse to get him to turn so the bullet would hit him in the back. He did not stop to look for one but continued down the slope.

He was on the south rim of Milk river valley. From this high point he could see the valley below him. About five miles to the north was the Milk river, curling through the basin of sagebrush and greasewood and bluejoint grass. Except for a few slight dips the valley floor was level until it emerged into the northern hills. These hills were not high or pointed; they formed mesas and plateaus and ran their distance into Canada some fifty miles to the north.

He lifted his eyes. Far to the north, there on the outermost boundaries of his vision, he saw the dim blue outlines of small peaks. These were in Canada. Though he did not know it at that time, they were the Wood Mountain range. Another mountain range, higher than Wood Mountain, lay to his west. These, he knew, were the Little Rockies, an outshoot of the Bearpaws and the Highwoods, which in turn stemmed from the most gigantic of mountains, the Rockies.

The scene was one of beauty and unlimited spaces. This land below, but a few short years before, had

been the hunting ground of the Dakotas, the Gros Ventres, and Blackfeet. Here on this plain the buffalo had roamed and arrows had penetrated his tough hide to bring about his passing. Here the teepees had stood; here braves had chanted war-songs and danced their dance of death.

Now white men were moving into this land with their cattle and horses and guns. The Indian was on his reservation, nursing his wounds and already conjuring memories of those other days. This land was raw and untamed but yet it locked in its great breast a great fertility.

Drummond brought his eyes to the wilderness directly below him. He was at the cliff of a ravine that stretched a tortuous path down onto the valley's bottom. Buckbrush and juniper and service bushes cluttered the rocky slope below, and, at the bottom of that slope, he saw Sid Hunter's shack.

The killers had descended this steep slope. He could see where their horses had skidded downward, dislodging rocks and gravel, but he saw no sign of the men below him until they came out of a gully far to his right.

They were riding abreast then, but soon they split up. Drummond's eyes, used to distance, took them up easily. The man on the east was the one who had taken his guns. He was the shortest and Drummond had marked him well. The men were riding different horses than those they had used to hold up the stage.

This brought a frown to Drummond; it had but one answer. They had obtained their new mounts at only one spot and that spot would be Sid Hunter's. Drummond was going down the slope now; he was sliding through the gravel, hurrying and breaking through the brush.

WHEN he neared Hunter's shack Drummond became cautious. Hidden by brush, he stood for a moment, looking at the dwelling. No smoke came from its chimney. He moved across a short space and pushed up against the frame of a window. The window was dirty and made for hard vision but he knew one thing then—there was nobody in the shack.

A dog started barking at the barn behind the house and he heard a man's surly voice say, "Quit that, Shep!" The dog stopped. The barn was made of upright poles. Willows had been placed against these and the cross-members and bound tight with barbwire. The roof was made of wild grass and brush. Drummond entered by the back door; Sid Hunter's back was toward him.

He was washing the shoulder of a roan horse. The dog, a mongrel collie, lay to one side, and the dog saw Drummond first. The mutt got to his feet, his hair stiff, a low growl rumbling. Hunter turned and saw Drummond.

He asked, "Who are you?"

"The name is Drummond."

Hunter was a small man but he was wiry. He looked at Drummond for some time and said, "What do you want?"

"Who owns that roan?"

"I don't know. Why ask?"

Drummond said, "You lie."

"I'm not used to bein' called a liar."

"I'm callin' you one. That bronc was used to hold up the stage an hour ago. He had pitch smeared over his brands, and you're washin' it off now. You're in with those hold-up men; you furnished them with fresh horses."

"You were on the stage?"

"I was."

"Never knew the thing was held up," said Hunter and went back to washing the roan's brand. He was using kerosene and the odor was sharp in Drummond's nostrils. He put the rifle into Hunter's back and took Hunter's .45 and gunbelt.

"Saddle two horses."

Hunter moved to a peg in the wall and took down a saddle. He was making to throw it on the roan when Drummond stopped him.

"A fresh horse for me, mister."

Hunter said, "Who's the other horse for?"

"You," said Drummond.

"This roan is good enough for me,"

said Hunter. He saddled another bronc—an iron-grey gelding, and Drummond saw that the animal was rested and tough. He made Hunter mount the roan and they rode out into the sunlight.

"Ride east," said Drummond.

"What's the idea?"

"I play 'em close," murmured Drummond. "I could take your gun an' ride away from the shack and you might have a rifle hidden handy and bring me down. The gang you work with plays for keeps. I've seen that today."

"They killed the wrong man, then?"

"They did."

"They'll kill you later," said Hunter. "They'll have to kill you. If you had any brains—"

"I ain't."

They rode for a mile this way and urgency stayed with Drummond. By now the man he wanted had gained valuable time and distance. Drummond had this advantage: the man did not know he was being followed and his course would be unhurried. One thing, then, was in Drummond's favor.

Now Drummond halted and said, "Turn around and ride back, Hunter. If you try to sneak around ahead of me I'm shootin' at you."

"An' me" asked Hunter.

Drummond had thought that over. He could tie Hunter and leave him for the sheriff, but there was little odds in that. It would take hours before he could get to Cottonwood and much time would elapse before the sheriff could reach Hunter. By that time Hunter would probably have freed himself and made himself scarce.

"Drift."

HUNTER whirled his horse and rode back and Drummond saw him only once again and that was from a high ridge. But he had scant eyes for Hunter; he was watching the three men below him. The man he wanted was fanning out, traveling the rim of the hills. Another was riding across the valley floor and the third was moving along the foothills.

The gray was a hill-horse with a good bottom, and Drummond's spurs lifted him. Drummond planned to circle the man, clinging to the higher reaches for hiding, and come in ahead of him.

He followed dim trails—trails ground out by the buffaloes and the cattle; when there was no trail, he made one. The bullberry bushes were thick; their sharp thongs snapped back, fierce and barring his passage. When he reached his objective, a high plateau—the gray was breathing heavily and a fine lather rimmed his headstall and the edges of the Navaho saddle blanket.

But the man was riding faster than Drummond had judged, and Drummond had undershot his mark. He rode high in the saddle, fitting his balance to the gray; his rifle was across the fork. The terrain was rougher here and the brush was thicker. The gray stumbled once, almost falling. But Drummond pulled the animal up and his spurs went heavily back.

This time he allowed for error and, when he saw the man again, the fellow was behind him. He had pulled his horse to a long trot and he rode angled ahead on his stirrups, both hands braced on the fork. Now, roughly, ten miles had been put behind him—distance enough in this rough country.

Drummond put the gray down a gully. Here endless streams of water, driven by the rains, had washed in sand and that muffled his horse's hoofs. He quit the horse on the run and left it there, its reins dragging. The animal, he figured, was rein broke and would stay in that spot.

He glanced back once. His assumption had been correct; the gray stood still. Then Drummond rounded a curve and the animal was cut from his sight. There was a trail here, circling the base of an out-thrust—a trail that men and horses seldom traveled. Drummond drew himself into the brush and waited.

He rolled a cigaret, but did not light it. It was hanging unlit on his underlip when he stepped out, his rifle up. The man drew his horse in

sharply and put his hand down. Drummond's command was clear.

"Don't reach for those guns, fellow."

The man's face was solid and heavy. His eyes were blue and without anger—rather, they were startled. He raised his hand and put both of his hands on the saddlehorn. He leaned back and his eyes showed something then.

"Who are you?"

Drummond smiled. "You've seen me before. Or is your memory bad?"

"I have?" said the man. "And where?"

"When you held up the stage. When you killed the salesman. Those guns hanging around your saddlefork are my guns."

The man gave in. "You borrowed a horse an' out-circled me?"

"Yes. From Hunter."

"I'll kill Hunter," the man said, tonelessly.

"He wasn't to blame," said Drummond. "My rifle was. . . "

There was a short silence. This man's eyes were powerful and strong; they showed his anger.

"What's your name?"

"Drummond."

"Then we made a mistake, huh? That gent we killed wasn't Drummond. Our man in Miles City must've got his bearin's crossed."

"He must have," agreed Drummond.

The man rocked back in his saddle, his legs straight in his stirrups. Drummond read then what he meant to do.

"Don't do it," warned Drummond. "I'll have to kill you."

The man did it, though. His spurs came back hard, ripping his bronc's shoulders. The horse plunged ahead and, as he went forward, the fellow dropped his right hand to his gun, pulling it.

Drummond's bullet brought him down. The man fired once but the bullet went into space. He rolled back across the cantle and slid off the rump of his horse. The horse tangled in his reins and went down in a heap. Dust rose and then the horse was standing up, its shoulders quivering in fear. But the man did not rise.

Drummond went ahead, his rifle ready. But this precaution was wasted; the man was dead. Drummond toed him over with a slowness and looked at him. There was dust on the man's face and dust on his clothes.

Drummond felt the bite of his thoughts. There was no remorse, no bitterness. Once this man had meant to kill him: this man had erred, and now he was dead. The game was just opening and Drummond wondered what the stakes were. But he knew he would not know that until he saw Web Drummond.

CHAPTER III

WHEN THE stage came into Cottonwood the driver halted it in front of the sheriff's office instead of the usual place, the Taylor Hotel. Sheriff Harry Carter was loafing in the shade and he came forward, a big man with bowed legs and an unhurried gait. Julia Lambert came down from the high seat, the driver helping her and Carter's gaze was on her, not in admiration but in curiosity. For this girl was strangely out of place in this land.

He said, "Howdy, ma'am," and lifted his hat. Then to the driver, "What's the trouble, fellow?"

"Two dead men inside," said the driver.

A few men came up and with their aid, Carter took the bodies into his office and laid them on the floor. The driver told him what had happened. Carter's heavy jaw mangled his tobacco.

"And there was another man?" he asked.

Julia Lambert answered. "Yes. His name was Drummond. You see, they killed the wrong man."

Carter asked a few more questions. The salesman was a stranger. But, he said, he had seen the thin man around town once or twice though he did not know his name. That had been about six months ago, he figured.

"Where did Drummond go?"

The driver said, "He went to Sid Hunter's to get a horse. Those three masked men took his guns an' he wanted them back. Could he be some relation to ol' Web Drummond?"

"Web's nephew," said Carter. He looked at Julia Lambert. "An your name?" She told him and said she was from Texas. She was tired and that showed on her. He said, kindly, "There'll be a coroner's inquest tomorrow, of course. You will be a witness, Miss Lambert."

"At what time?"

"Sometime in the afternoon."

Julia took her bag and went to the Taylor Hotel. She said, to the clerk, "Is Mr Tod Lambert in town?"

"Haven't seen him since three days ago. He isn't workin' at the bank any longer, you know; the bank is closed up. The examiners closed it about five months ago. I hear it is going to open soon, though."

Julia's frown grew. "He should be here to meet me. I'm his sister." Her fatigue was growing stronger. "You have a room, I suppose."

She followed him upstairs and they went to the end of the hall. The room was big enough but the hotel was old and the furnishings weren't complete. When the clerk was gone she closed the door and stood with her back against it. She closed her eyes and let her body slump.

It was not like Tod to miss meeting her and a feeling grew inside of her. This took shape and form and it was not pleasant. She went to the bed and opened her bag. She washed slowly, the water warm against her flushed skin. She sat down and then got to her feet and went to the window.

The heat was subsiding now; a touch of coolness was coming across the hills from the mountains. She opened the protesting window and let this sweep across her arms and face. She was hungry but for the present her hunger was a minor element.

Cottonwood had been aptly named. Here along the river's bank the thick trees grew and shaded the plank sidewalks of the main streets. A group of men were standing in front of Carter's office where the sheriff was saddling a dun gelding. A few horses stood at tie-racks stomping now and then at heel-flies. The spring of the year was on the land and the bolls of the cottonwood trees were splitting open to drop their cotton on the walks and in the streets.

An old man was carrying the mail sack from the stage of the postoffice across the street. The down was thick in one place and his boots pulled through it, scattering it to the lazy, indifferent wind.

She thought, "Your life is like that. Moving always and then resting before the wind. . . Then she thought of Tod and that thought was not bright. It was a thought without center, and it brought no pleasure. . .

She was still standing there when Len Drummond rode into town leading the horse that carried the dead man.

HARRY Carter was putting his left foot in stirrup when he saw Drummond riding toward him. Carter dropped his boot to the dust and waited until Drummond had drawn his horse beside him. He saw the badge on Carter's blue denim shirt and he said, "I take it you're the sheriff here?"

"Name's Carter. Harry Carter."

"I'm Len Drummond."

"Miss Lambert was tellin' me about your bein' on the stage."

Drummond said, "Miss Lambert?"

"The girl on the stage."

"Oh, I see."

Carter looked at the dead man. "You kill him?"

Drummond said, "He took my guns an' I went to get them back."

Carter glanced at Drummond's .45s, there on Drummond's hips. "Looks like you get what you go after."

"I usually do."

Drummond was sizing up this man, building his evaluation of him; and he knew one thing—this man was hard. He reminded him of a pit bulldog. Relentlessness was carved in the heavy, leonine head; doggedness was mirrored in the pale, lifeless eyes, the blunt jaw. And blended with

this stolidity was intelligence. Carter would be a valuable man in a tight. . . if he were on your side.

Now Carter went to the dead man. The man lay jack-knifed across his bronc, his hands and feet tied to the cinch rings, his head hanging. Carter took him by the hair and raised his dusty head. He stood, emotionless, and looked down on the pitted, ugly face with the rolled eyes. Then he let the head drop and he wiped his hands unconsciously on his chaps.

"Stranger to me," he admitted.

Drummond said, "I take it your an old timer here?"

Carter nodded. "Yes, but the last few months—well, things have been kinda unsettled and a lot of new faces have come in."

Drummond shrugged. "I suppose there'll be an inquest?"

Carter masticated his tobacco. "Prob'ly this afternoon—wait a minute, I mean tomorrow afternoon. Did you intend to stay in town that long?"

"I reckon so."

Carter's eyes were heavy under shaggy brows. "Did you see the horses that these three holdups rode? That is, would you know them if you saw them again?"

Drummond told him about the horses being at Sid Hunter's. Carter nodded and said, "So you figure ol' Sid's in on it, huh?"

"I'd know that roan anywhere."

"Reckon I'll head out an' have a pow-wow with Sid," said Carter. "He ain't been in this country long—say six months or thereabouts. So far he ain't stepped over the rope but a man can never tell about his fellow humans." He turned to a deputy. "Untie this hunk of meat off'n that saddle an' tote him inside."

The deputy was a towering redhead. His grin was wide. "That makes a good day's average, Harry. Three stiffs on the office floor."

Carter said, "An' there'll be more."

Drummond wondered what he meant by that. Evidently there was, and there had been, trouble on this range. He was on the verge of asking Carter to explain his statement more fully when a girl came up.

THIS girl, too, was beautiful. But while the beauty of Julia Lambert was warm and soft, the beauty of this girl was vivid and glowing. She wore buckskin—a creamy buckskin jacket set over a white blouse, a darker buckskin split-skirt that accentuated her firm thin thighs. Where Julia Lambert was dark, this woman was blonde. Her eyes were blue and they were like her mouth—there was no yielding there.

She said, to Carter, "What's going on?"

Carter took his hat and rolled it in blunt fingers. He said, "Elaine, meet Mr Drummond. Drummond, Miss Elaine Jordan. She owns the C Bar outfit out along the north rim of the valley."

The girl's eyes were on Drummond; they were sharp and keen. Drummond met their cutting edge and his glance dulled it. There was harshness in this woman, and Drummond had a sudden idea that she was not as hard as she portrayed. She had built this shield before her. Drummond wondered why.

"Any relation to Web Drummond?"

"His nephew."

She looked at Harry Carter. "And here I was about to offer him a job." Carter did not laugh; she did, and her laugh was low, throaty. Drummond rolled her words in his mind and they did not make reason.

He was on the verge of asking her what she meant when she noticed the brand on the dead man's horse. She said, "That horse has the C Bar. That's my horse."

"When did you see him last?" asked Carter.

"We turned him loose on Swamp creek three weeks ago. He got pretty gaunt during spring roundup and I figured the grass would fat him. Who was riding him?"

Drummond told her about the holdup. She went into the office and looked at the dead man. Her face was without emotion.

Carter asked, "Do you know him, Miss?"

"No," she said.

Carter said, "Well, I'll have to be hittin' along. That gent prob'ly figured on stealin' that horse from you, Miss Elaine. You oughta watch your stock more close." Carter swung up and rode away.

The girl looked at Drummond. "You intend to stay in this region?" she asked.

Drummond nodded. "Why ask?" "You'll know. . . soon enough." Her laugh was throaty again. "No use breaking up our friendship too soon, is there? We ought to let it live for a minute or so, anyway, shouldn't we?"

Drummond looked at her. "Maybe it won't be broken."

"It has to be," she said, and turned away. She went to a pinto tied at a rack, swung up and rode out of town, going to the north. Drummond watched her for a long moment, noticing that she rode straight in the saddle; then he wrestled with her words another moment, and decided that time would tell him. . .

THERE were three men standing in front of a saloon across the street, and Drummond knew they were studying him with a veiled indifference. Drummond had seen gunslingers before and these men were that. Two were the run-of-the-mill; no more, no less. But the third —evidently their boss—was of another type.

He was young, about Drummond's age. The trails had marked him, and the mark was there to see. He was tall, but yet he was heavy; he was solid, but not thin. And there was vanity in him; this showed in his pearl-handled guns, his hand-stamped, thick belts, his creased California pants, and his rolled-brim gray Stetson. And, with this vanity, was a harshness, a bestial cruelty. The hawked nose, the thin lips, the high cheekbones, showed this to Drummond.

Drummond moved along the street and this man's eyes were on him. They were weighing him and judging him as men would judge a horse. . . or an enemy. Drummond was conscious of this; it rubbed against him. He turned into the general store and spoke to the clerk.

"I'm lookin' for Web Drummond."

The menial said, "He's out to his ranch, I suppose. He can't walk, you know. That bullet did somethin' to his spine. The doctor treats him every day. Doc was tellin' me he thought Web would be on his feet soon, though; he's a good man. He's your uncle, I understand?"

"News travels fast in this town," said Drummond.

"In any small town," added the clerk.

Drummond gave this matter brief thought: one thing stood out, bright and disturbing. Who had shot Web Drummond, and why? And when? He thought he would ask more, then decided he would let Web tell him.

Another thing puzzled him. Web Drummond was traveling under his real name here. But Drummond soon saw the answer to that: on the trails Web had been known as Hank Gibson; few men—if any but Drummond and his father—had known that Hank Gibson was, in reality, Web Drummond. So, judging from this man's talk, Web had worked himself into a position of trust in this community.

Drummond bought a package of Durham and leaned against the counter, looking out on Cottonwood's main street. The three men had left their vantage point now—that told Drummond they had been there for one reason, to appraise him at close range. And then, for the first time, he saw the lettering above the brick building.

THE CITIZEN'S SAVINGS
AND TRUST BANK
COTTONWOOD, MONTANA
Web Drummond, Manager

Drummond thought, "He's operatin' a bank. . . instead of robbin' one." That thought amused him and he played with it. "Must be odd to walk into a bank without a gun in his hand."

Then he saw that the bank was closed. The wide blinds were pulled down on the windows and the door.

That brought a frown and more questions but he dismissed them; Web would tell him all.

Julia Lambert came down the street. She was pretty against the dusk and Drummond stepped out and lifted his hat. "Howdy, Miss Lambert."

She said, "How did you know my name?"

"I have ears." He sobered and said, "You're a stranger here too, I take it?"

She nodded. "My brother Tod was supposed to be in town to meet me. But he must have thought I would come on a later date. I understand he is working on a ranch, the C Bar. He used to work in the bank until it closed."

Drummond nodded, and kept his thoughts. This fitted in somewhere —but where? The C Bar was owned by Elaine Jordan and the bank was owned by Web Drummond. And, because he was Web's nephew, Elaine Jordan had prophesied they would not be friends. Drummond mulled this over and decided he was hungry.

"Have you had supper?"

"No, I was just going to the Steerhead Cafe. The hotel clerk said that was a good place to eat. Have you eaten?"

"Let's test their grub," said Drummond.

CHAPTER IV

ELAINE Jordan rode into the C Bar at dusk. This was a big spread with huge, sprawling corrals. Haystacks of native bluejoint were behind barbwire fences. This was the slack season between cutting hay and fall beef roundup and the fence-riders were coming in. They did not ride singly; they traveled in pairs. Rifles rode in saddle-scabbards and their horses were the toughest. Two of them rode past her as she entered the yard and one said, "I'll take your horse, Miss Elaine."

"Miss Jordan to you," she said.

The man said, "Pardon me," but he said it coldly.

"Send Tod Lambert to the house."

She walked into the house, threw her gloves on the table. An unrest and uneasiness held her and her face showed it. She stood for a moment watching Tod Lambert leave the bunkhouse and then she turned. There was a picture above the rock fireplace and she looked at it for a moment. The man therein was heavy of jaw and strong of character, but she drew no strength from his level eyes. She said under her breath, "Dad, help the old daughter pull through. . . " But the eyes were without glimmer and she turned to face the door as Tod Lambert entered.

"Sit down," she said.

Lambert was a tall fellow, no more than twenty. His skin had lost most of its color. He said, "I'll stand up. My ribs an' back don't feel so well when I sit down."

She repeated, "Sit down."

Tod Lambert sat down slowly. He did not select one of the easy chairs; he took a straight backed chair. His blue eyes were without trust. Elaine Jordan let the silence grow and Lambert felt its keen edge.

"How old are you?" she said.

"A little over twenty. Why ask?"

"You took it up early," she said cynically. "Hardly able or old enough to scrape the fuzz off your cheeks."

"Don't preach to me," said Lambert. "You had me come for a purpose. What is it?

Elaine Jordan said, "Your sister is in town. She came in on the stage that Jib Weldon and Shorty Hanks and John Dabner held up."

Tod Lambert's eyes were bright. "Did those devils—"

"She's all right," she assured.

"Where is she now?"

"At the Taylor Hotel."

"I'll have to get into town."

"Keep your tongue to yourself."

Tod Lambert got to his feet and said, "I don't want a rope around my neck. I got a little sense." He went to the door. "Did they get this Drummond gent?"

"No."

"What!"

Elaine Jordan said, "Get out. And keep what you know to yourself."

LAMBERT left and Elaine went into the kitchen. A colored woman was peeling potatoes and a pot was bubbling on the stove. She was fat and heavy and she walked with a lumbering stride.

Elaine said, "Supper almost ready, Binnie."

"Sure is, child."

"You hear a lot," said Elaine.

"I don't hear nothin'. Me, I ain't got no ears an' I ain't got no eyes."

"Sometimes I'm afraid, Binnie."

"I raised you on my knee," said Binnie. "You're daddy an' mother brought me into this country from the South long before you were born. You ain't got no call to be afraid of me, child."

"I'm not afraid of you. I'm afraid of myself."

Elaine ate supper alone. Despite the fact she had asked Binnie many times to eat with her, the colored woman always ate in the kitchen. She was still at the table when Jib Weldon came in. He was the cold, flashy rider that Drummond had seen in Cottonwood. He sat down opposite her.

"You ate at the cook-shack, didn't you?" she asked.

He said, "I didn't come here for chow. Can't a man jus' sit at the table with you—"

"There's a chair over there," she said.

Jib Weldon grunted and moved to the other chair, his thin lips twisted. "You're high an' mighty," he said. "Someday a man'll come along an' break that proud spirit of yours."

Weldon got to his feet. He walked to the window, his spur rowels making noise. He stood there looking into the darkness and then said, "Well?"

"Things didn't go so well, did they? You tried to pull a fast trick and it backfired. Now John Dabner's dead down in Cottonwood. Who was that thin man who got killed at the holdup?"

"Known him for quite a time," said Jib Weldon. "Had him stationed at Circle a-waitin' for Drummond. I wonder where we got mixed up? Curly, down in Miles City, musta made a big mistake. Pickin' that drummer for Drummond an' then sendin' a rider ahead of the stage to tell Converse."

"Converse?"

"That thin gent. The dead man."

"Did Drummond recognize you in Cottonwood?"

"No. We wore ol' clothes. We hid them at Sid Hunter's an' put on our regular outfits. We had the brands on our horses smeared over."

"Harry Carter rode out to Hunter's."

"He won't find Sid, an' I'll tell you why. Sid Hunter's down in the bunkhouse now. He lit over this way right after Drummond took a horse an' rode after Dabner. I wonder if the sheriff recognized Dabner?"

Elaine Jordan shook her head. "He didn't. Dabner had only been here three days. He'd never been to town. You never told me you intended to hold up the stage to try to kill Drummond."

Jib Weldon smiled.

"Why didn't you?"

"What difference did it make?"

She said, "Who owns the C Bar?"

"You do, of course."

"Then I'm givin' the orders."

"Okay." Weldon spread his thin hands and looked at them.

Elaine felt futility pull at her. This thing was too fast, too sketchy, too deadly; it brought emotion to her, she checked it. "You pull something like that again, without my permission, and I'm discharging you, Weldon."

"Okay," said Weldon.

"You don't seem bothered."

Weldon said, "I'm not." He got to his feet and put his hand on her shoulder. She brushed it off and just then Binnie came from the kitchen. She glanced at Weldon and then ignored him.

"Another bun, Miss Elaine."

Jib Weldon turned and left. Elaine looked at the woman and said quietly, "Thanks, Binnie. It would be tough without you."

"Don't say that, child."

"But it would."

Binnie deliberately changed the subject. "This Mister Drummond

feller, Miss. His uncle sure has been a powerful good-lookin' man in his day. Is his nephew jus' as handsome?"

Elaine smiled. "No, he isn't handsome. Oh, he's good-looking but—Well, he's quiet and slow-speaking and he's strong." She sought for the right words. "He's the kind of a man you'd like to have on your side. . . "

* * *

HARRY Carter came into town when the dusk was thick, and his eyes showed a mingled disgust and anger. Drummond had taken a room at the hotel; he would ride to his uncle's in the morning, the distance was thirty odd miles. He got to his feet and sauntered down to where Carter was leaving his horse.

"No luck?"

Carter pulled the latigo strap from ring. "No luck," he repeated. He peeled the leather from his horse, pulled off the headstall and bit; the horse trotted down the street, heading for the open gate of the pasture on Cottonwood's outskirts. He stopped in front of the hardware store and buried his nose in the plank watering trough. Drummond held his tongue and waited.

"Sid Hunter's flew the coop, an' he ain't left a stray feather behin' him. He burned his two-bit outfit to the ground. I followed his trail to the rimrock and lost it on the points."

"Yes."

Carter took a sack from his saddle, his heavy fingers jerking the saddle-strings loose. He went into his office and Drummond followed. Carter tipped the sack upside down and burned papers tumbled out. Some of them were unreadable but others had only the edges burned. Drummond picked one up and read it. It was a printed ad for Drummond's liniment, good for man, beast, and bird.

"Where did you find these?"

"Found them in the ashes of Hunter's shack. They must have been in that drummer's grip. Those holdup men probably figured that grip contained some valuable papers. Instead of that they contained samples of horse liniment and some printed literature. Drummond's horse liniment."

"So that's why they thought he was me, huh?"

Carter sat down and stretched his heavy legs ahead of him. "Probably got hold of word this salesman was sellin' Drummond's liniment. They prob'ly figured it was you under disguise. Say, did Web write a letter sendin' for you?"

"Yeah, some months ago."

"That explains it, then. Whoever killed the drummer musta heard about that letter Web sent you an' was on the lookout. Well, they made a mistake—an' you're livin' on sheepherder's time, borrowed time. You ever hear of this Drummond liniment?"

"Never have."

"Damned lucky coincidence for you, but hell on that fat man." Carter glanced around the floor. "Guess the coroner's been after them dead men." He dug a cigar out of his pocket and crammed it in his mouth. "I suppose you're wonderin' what this is all about?"

"Web'll tell me."

Carter said, "Reckon that's as good as any other way. Jus' walk tight aroun' town, like you was walkin' on eggs, an' ride the high ridges. Wes stopped a bullet an' it danged near killed him. You stop one an' it may kill you; bullets have a habit of doin' that, you know?"

"What's on the deck? Or is that too personal?"

"Lots of things," said Carter. "I may an' I may not. She's a hard thing to see, an' when you can't see anythin' you can't fight it."

"That's right," agreed Drummond.

THE night was heavy now and lights in stores and buildings threw long thin squares of yellow across the sidewalks and into the streets. The scent of growing plants and budding trees was in the air. The night coolness had set in and the heat of the day had disappeared.

An unrest held Drummond. He had stretched the kinks from his legs; he should have been tired, but

he wasn't. There was danger in this town and it lay like a shroud across it. And through this went the rip and cut of his thoughts, trying to sort one from the other; there was conjecture and unanswered questions, and there was a great awareness of that danger.

He went into a saloon, ordered a drink of beer. He rolled the heavy mug in his fingers, sending his glance around the saloon. Three men were playing poker and two were shooting pool on a table evidently brought from St Louis on the Missouri river steamboats.

The beer was warm and tepid; it held no taste for his tongue. He paid for it and sauntered to the card table and watched the game. The three were playing stud poker and the chips were worth a nickel for the reds, three for the blues, and two cents for the white.

"Mind if I sit in?"

"Anybody's game," a man said.

Drummond bought ten bucks worth. The game see-sawed back and forth: now he won a few dollars, now he lost. A few people drifted in and he judged them as townsmen, evidently stopping for a beer or a shot of hard stuff before going home for the night. Drummond sat against the wall and had eyes for each of these men as they entered, even though it seemed but a cursory glance.

The hours slipped away. One man dropped out and cashed in three bucks loser. The chips were steadily growing in front of another man. Drummond debated about going to his room and going to bed or getting a horse from the livery and heading for the ranch of Web Drummond. He decided on the horse. He shoved his chips to the dealer. He had lost about five dollars.

"Game too slow?" asked the houseman. "If it is, maybe we can step it up a mite or two?" He looked at the third man. "What do you say, Wes?"

"Okay with me," said Wes.

Drummond grinned. "Not with me," he said. "My roll's as thin as a woman's skin." He pocketed his change and went to the livery-barn. The town was so deserted that the pound of his boots on the sidewalk sounded loud. At first he thought there was nobody in the barn but when he got inside he saw the dim glow of a low-turned lantern coming from the office. He entered and saw a grizzled oldster sitting two-legged on his chair against the wall, his head on his chest as he slept.

"Could I rent a saddle-horse?" he asked.

The chair came to four legs hurriedly. The oldster peered at him through rheumy eyes. "Musta dozed off," he mumbled. "Thought at first you was the boss. You ain't got a hoss in here, have you?"

"No, I want to hire one."

"Where you goin'?"

"Out to Web Drummond's."

"Oh, yeah, you're Web's nephew. Sure, you can have that sorrel there providin' you get him back in a few days."

"How do you get out to Web's?"

"Right out of town to the north you'll hit a crick comin' into the river. That's Frenchman crick. You foller it north for about ten or eleven miles than another crick—jus' a dry wash, you might say—angles in from the west. Foller it for another six or so an' you ride right into Web's. Say, you ain't got a drink on you, have you?"

Drummond had bought a quart and a pint at the saloon, intending to take it out to Web. He broke open the bundle and took out the pint and uncorked it. The oldster licked his lips and took a long drink. Drummond wondered if he was ever going to come up for air.

"You takin' one?" he asked.

Drummond shook his head. "Keep the bottle, fella."

"By gun, I sure thank you." The oldster shook the bottle speculatively, his eyes a-gleam. He tilted it for a short snort. "Sure, you can take that sorrel. Good horse with a good bottom. Reckon they ain't so much of a hurry to get him back, at that. There's a saddle on the hook in his stall."

Drummond saddled the sorrel and adjusted the stirrups and mounted

and rode out the back door. He put the sorrel at a long lope through the sagebrush, heading to the northwest. A few miles out of Cottonwood he came to the junction of the Frenchman creek. He pulled the sorrel to a running-walk.

The sorrel was long-legged and young. His shoulders had not stiffened up yet from hard rides through the rough country and it was like sitting in a rocking-chair. The sky was sprinkled with stars. The Milky Way lay like a sparkling crescent of diamonds across the deep blue. The air was fresh and keen and the sorrel pulled at the bit but Drummond held him with a hard hand.

HE met no riders on the Frenchman creek trail until a mile before he turned up the dry wash. The man was riding fast—so fast he evidently had not heard the sound of Drummond's approach. Drummond pulled the sorrel into the brush and waited until the rider had passed.

About a hundred yards up-trail the rider pulled his horse to a walk, and Drummond saw him clearly as he rode past. He was a slim, young man and he rode bent forward in his saddle. Drummond saw his face clearly; he would know him again. The man was coughing, holding his mouth with his bandanna.

The cough was dry and racking, and Drummond thought it sounded like a consumptive's rasping cough. When the man had passed Drummond rode out again on the trail. He put the sorrel across space at a long lope.

A wagon trail wended up the dry wash, twisting around the out-thrusts of the sloping fingers of foothills. As he neared Web's spread the country grew rougher. Drummond, ever the cowman, saw that the grass was good, though, and potholes of water dotted the bottom of the coulee. Cattle stood around these waterholes or grazed on the foothills, where they were black formless shapes under boxelder trees and choke-cherry bushes. They were grazing in the willows, too, and they lumbered away at sight of him; fat cattle heavy with grass and water—good cattle.

Suddenly the road left the coulee and climbed onto the benchland. Then Drummond saw the ranch ahead of him. Big buildings lay like shadows under the stars, and he mentally appraised the spread. There were haystacks and feeding corrals and two big barns with high roofs and haymows. And around it all, fencing it from the northern winds of winter, were spreading cottonwoods, evidently built as a windbreak.

Drummond pulled the sorrel to a walk. The house or bunk-houses held no lights; all was dark. Now the road twisted in between the cottonwood and here the man stopped Drummond. Drummond did not see him because he was hidden in the shrubbery around the base of a cottonwood.

The man was a husky gent, bowlegged and wide. He had a rifle under his arm; a rifle pointing nonchalantly at Drummond. But Drummond knew that, with one clean sweep, the man could swing that rifle up, its hammer coming back.

"Hold still where you all are, Mister. Don't let them paws of your'n drop to them guns. I crave to look you over."

He ambled forward and Drummond saw his face for the first time; he was a negro, a giant blackman.

"Who are you, man?"

Drummond said, "I'm Len Drummond. Web's my uncle"

There was a moment's silence and then the black man said, "Okay, fella. Climb off'n your bronc an' we'll walk to the house."

CHAPTER V

TOD LAMBERT reached Cottonwood at eleven, a cough in his throat and a bitterness in his heart. He tied his horse in front of the hotel and wiped his mouth with his bandanna. There was a trace of blood on the handkerchief.

The clerk was sleeping in a chair. Tod shook him awake and asked, "Which room has my sister got?"

"Damn you," said the clerk, "you could have looked at the register."

Tod climbed the stairs and knocked on the door. The room was dark and he knocked again. He heard somebody move inside and a creak of yellow lamplight showed under the door.

"Who's there?"

"Tod."

Julia Lambert had pulled a robe over her white nightgown. Her sleek hair hung to her shoulders. Tod entered and stood and looked at her. At last she asked, "Aren't you going to kiss your sister?"

He kissed her roughly, almost shyly. "Elaine Jordan told me you were in town. I work for her, you know. You prob'ly saw her on the street this afternoon."

"She was pointed out to me."

There was another silence and Tod finally broke it by a low cough. He tried to stop there but the harder coughs came. When he stopped his lips held a trace of blood; there was concern in Julia's eyes.

"Why, what's wrong, Tod?"

He made his voice light. "Some call it consumption, some call it tuberculosis. I call it just t. b."

Julia sat down. "Then. . . it got worse?"

"Yes."

Julia looked at him steadily. "Where did you get all that money?" she asked.

"What money?"

"That money deposited to your name in the El Miro, Texas, bank? You see, you sent me so much money I got suspicious. I made a few inquiries. I found out that you had almost twenty thousand deposited there in your name—money you had mailed down from Montana."

"So that's why you're here," he said. "Big sister gets checkin' up on her kid brother. If you came here jus' to find that out you might just as well catch the mornin' stage back."

"You won't tell me?"

"Yes," he said, "I'll tell you. I stole it when I was workin' in Web Drummond's bank. That's one reason the bank went caflooy. Closed its doors."

"They didn't find it out—that you took the money?"

"I'm not so dumb," he said. "I covered my shortages. In fact, I covered them so well that Web Drummond took the blame. They made him close his bank."

"But Web Drummond knows you took it?"

"He suspects me, I suppose. But we had another clerk at that time; I shoved the blame onto him. But before the bank examiners got to question him he was dead. The coroner's inquest called it suicide."

"Was it?"

"The inquest called it that."

Julia Lambert walked to the window. She stood with her back to him, tall and straight. Then she turned and said, "Mother is dead. I wrote you a letter. Did you get it?"

"Yes, but it was too far to go to her funeral and it would have taken too long. Where is she buried?"

"In the family plot." Julia held a silence and then said, "She was lucky, in a way."

"What do you mean?"

"She never got to see you for what you really are."

Tod Lambert said, "Cut that sob talk. I know what I'm doin'; I'm playin' for high stakes. That bank was small stuff. We're out to tack Web Drummond's hide to the fence. An' when it's over with I'll have money galore."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You'll see, if you stick aroun' long enough."

"You're not tough," said Julia. "You just think you are. This is no fun for me, Tod. But you know where your end will be, don't you?"

TOD Lambert grinned crookedly. "Sure, there's four outs. One is the t. b. to kill me. The other two are danglin' at the end of a rope or goin' down under a gun. But the fourth is what it is goin' to be. South America has docs that can kill these t. b. bugs. Money will buy them, money'll buy anythin' down there. An' me an' Jib Weldon will have plenty of money when we drift outa these parts."

"Jib Weldon?"

Tod Lambert's eyes were frosty

pinpoints. "You might talk," he said. "You might blab to the wrong people."

"Then keep it to yourself."

But there was braggadoccio in Tod Lambert. "Jib Weldon is Elaine Jordan's so-called foreman. Elaine started this feud against Web Drummond an' Jib an' me saw we could saddle her horse for us to ride."

"And Elaine?"

"What she thinks doesn't count. Jib an' me—"

She interrupted. "You mean *just* Jib."

"What are you drivin' at?"

"You'll do the dirty work and Jib Weldon will probably leave you holding an empty sack."

"That," said Tod Lambert, "is your opinion." A spasm of coughing gripped him and he leaned against the wall. Finally it passed and the tips of his cheekbones were white against his pale skin. Julia's eyes held a light that drove anger savagely through him. His voice was sharp. "Now that you've seen me I suppose you're satisfied an' you'll head back to your cute little schoolhouse in Texas."

"You aren't the same."

"It's been six years since you saw me," said Tod Lambert. "Of course, I've changed. Everythin' changes, I'm no exception. I ain't got long to live. These bugs'll see to that. I've thought this over. I thought at first I might go easy with you an' then I figured you'd find out sooner or later. I'm givin' it to you straight. It's a hell of a way to talk to my only sister, but it's the only way I know an' it's the best way. Catch the stage out in the morning' an' try to forget you ever saw me."

"Could I forget?"

"I don't know," said Tod Lambert. "Do you?"

The pride in this girl was strong; she did not bow now. She was calm—too calm—and this graveness marked her, showing her strength, her character. Tod Lambert read all this; he took it to himself, and he steeled himself with strength. Moments ran into minutes and he waited.

"No," she said, "I'm not going."

"That isn't sense."

"To you, prob'ly not," she said. "You're my brother and I'm staying with you, Tod. Maybe God and fate will be good to me and to you and see us through."

"Your tongue," he said, "has honey on it. You haven't lost that, have you, Julia?" His voice was lower now. "Look at it this way. I'm in it and the bridges are down. Water's running wild and the current is strong. The scent is strong an' the end is close. I've played a hand all the way and the jackpot's ahead. An' I aim to be there when Jib Weldon hits it."

"You think, then, only of money?"

"You can say that again."

"What about honor and respect?"

"Men fight for honor, they fight for respect. I don't. I fight for cold cash, and when I fight I fight for keeps."

JULIA looked at her fingers. Tod Lambert noticed that her hands were trembling. A vague feeling, something alien to him for a long time, crept across him. He understood it as pity; that angered him. This was the way, and the only way, to handle this; he knew that—too many times had he thought that this situation would arise, too many times had he thought out a solution. Now that solution was clear, and he would follow it.

He said, "And you will still stay here?"

"Yes."

"My secret?"

"Have I ever told a secret of yours?"

He thought that over. "No."

She said, "I'll stay until the day they kill you or hang you or until you die a natural death. Or until you leave this country. Or—" her voice was low—"until that day you find the burden too heavy and—"

"I'll never kill myself."

There was no more to say and both knew it. Both had laid their cards on the table and both knew that fate was the dealer. What cards either would hold later, neither knew. Julia knew then the pangs of regret and sorrow.

The taste was bitter to her tongue, heavy to her heart.

"Web Drummond's nephew is here now. He came in on the stage with me. You know that, I suppose?

Tod Lambert nodded. "He's in the book," he said. "Jib Weldon has him marked." He said, "I have to be goin'."

He kissed her once again, his lips cold. Then he was going to his horse, going down the stairs. Out on the street he stood beside his horse and glanced up at Julia's window. He saw the shadow of her there and it lay across him.

That inner reserve melted now and he stood looking for a moment at the distant stars. And he found himself thinking, *A rope—a gun— or a t. b. bug...* But the coils were too strong; they enmeshed him and held him and they were tightening more each minute. He put his weight to the stirrup and turned the horse out of town and then another thought said, *Damn you, Jib Weldon, damn you. . . And damn you too, Tod Lambert. . .*

* * *

THIS man had ruled men—he had held their obedience by his brains, by his fists, and by his guns. But time had touched him, as it does all men, and it had taken his physical strength. But it had not bowed his indomitable will; time could break his flesh but it could not bend his will.

Now, with the lamplight flickering over his gray hair, he sat in the rocking chair, his crutches leaning against the wall beside him. His shoulders were yet wide; they held no sag. His skin was seamed, course; his jaw was heavy. Thick brows hung over his eyes. Eyes that were deep burning pits of darkness.

Now, those eyes held a strange glow as they rested on Len Drummond. They measured him and marked him and what they saw must have pleased them, for a smile tugged at the heavy lips.

Web Drummond's glance flicked to the giant negro. "You might just as well put your artillery away, Latigo," he said. "This is him, sure as hell."

"Your nephew, Web?"

"Yes, Len Drummond. My brother Jim's boy. He looks like his pappy did at his age, only his pappy was a little heavier. Well, what you got to say, Len?"

Len Drummond smiled. "Glad to be here, Web. Your letter finally caught up with me. I would've been here sooner only it had a hard time findin' me. Reckon I moved a mite too often."

"You get the last one? I wrote you two of 'em."

"The one I got was postmarked last January."

"Then you never got the second one. 'Cause in it I asked you to stop in the bank at Colorado Springs and get fifty thousand dollars for me from Hank Adams, the banker there. Guess it was just as well you didn't get it because I heard a few weeks ago that Hank had died. And with him dead I never could have borrowed the money."

Len Drummond leaned back in his chair. The thing was clear in his mind, now: the drummer had had a bag full of samples, and those holdup men had expected him to carry a bag filled with currency. So the drummer had died and his grip had held only samples of a horse-medicine. Another error had been made and, because of that error, Drummond was still alive. But a man's luck can't hold out forever. Drummond broke the short silence.

"You seem to be hoein' a tough row, Web, an' it looks to me like your hoe is plenty dull. Who's this gent?"

"Shake hands with Latigo Jones," said Web Drummond.

The negro's hand was strong and sure; his smile was wide. "A friend of Web Drummond's is a friend of mine. You see, Len, me an' this ol' rooster used to fan the wild ones out there along the No-Whisper Trail, until he stopped robbin' banks an' started runnin' one. An' he ran it legal, too."

"Until them young bucks stole the bottom out from under me."

"What young bucks?" asked Len Drummond.

"Either Ted Lambert or Kiggie Smith. Smith was found dead a while back, a bullet hole through his skull. Looked like suicide but a man can have his doubts, can't he?"

Drummond nodded. "Free country, Web. What happened to you?"

"Bullet tagged me."

"Where, when, an' where at?"

"Down in Rawhide canyon. Was headin' across country from town one day, right before the examiners closed my bank. Reckon my eyesight ain't what it once was 'cause I never to this day could tell who cut me outa that saddle. Fact is, the gent was up on a butte, shootin' down, shootin' from behin'. Bullet gouged across my ribs an' took a hunk outa my spine but I'm gettin' so I can navigate on them wooden pins of mine purty pronto."

"Who in the hell," asked Drummond, "would be out to tack your hide to the fence?"

WEB Drummond shrugged. "Hard to tell, Len. I've made a lotta enemies in my time; a man in my position was bound to. Could be almost anybody but you an' ol' Latigo here. You see, the C Bar doesn't cotton to us Drummond hands too much."

"A girl owns the C Bar, huh?"

"Yeah, Elaine Jordan. Purty as a picture; and proud, too—and she's a go getter. Her daddy died about a year ago. Me an' Otto Jordan never was close friends, but we had no hard feelin's between us. He rode his end of the range and I rode mine; but when he died—well, Elaine has her plans."

The vision of Elaine Jordan flashed across Len Drummond's mind: he saw her cool, blonde beauty, saw again that cold, sardonic pride. There was strength in her well-built body and it would take strength to defeat her. For behind her was this pride, and this pride was strong indeed.

"And they conflict with yours, Web?"

"She wants the whole thing," said Web Drummond. "She wants all of this Milk river valley range. She's tried to buy me out but hell, I won't sell. What is there for me any other place? People don't know me as Hank Gibson here—this country has no strong law; people take a man for what he is regardless of his past, they never inquire into that. What if I went south?"

"Some ambitious lawman'd pick us up," said Latigo Jones. He rolled his eyes and blew smoke toward the ceiling. "An' one of us'd have to kill the gentleman an' we're too danged old to start over that trail again. Or else," he corrected, "he might kill us."

"I met Miss Jordan in town," said Len Drummond. "She didn't look like the type who'd go in for bushwhackin'."

"She ain't that kind," said Web Drummond. "But you don't know her foreman, Jib Weldon. He came into this country right after Elaine's pappy died. I've heard he come off the hootowl trail but a man can't pay too much attention to that." His voice softened. "Sometime I figure maybe Elaine might pull outa this mess if Jib Weldon wasn't her range boss."

"What's Weldon got at stake?"

"Plenty. He practically runs the C Bar. He's smart and slick an' that young lady prob'ly knows it by now. We get rid of Weldon an' I figure we got the bear by the throat an' to hell an' gone. In other words, the thing will be over with."

Len Drummond got to his feet, walked to the stove. Despite the fact that it was summer, the night was cold and Latigo had dropped some old newspapers and some chips into the potbellied heater. Drummond put his hands behind his back and felt the heat creep up his length. Finally he said, "Where do I come in at?"

"You keep the ranch for me," said Web Drummond, "an' its yours, Len. All you gotta do is provide a place for me to spend the rest of my earthly days. Is that okay with you?"

Len Drummond thought that over. "It's a big world," he said slowly, "and I'm a young man and there's lotsa places I've never seen."

"I'll state it this way," said Web

Drummond "You fight for this place an' win the fight an' I'm deedin' the spread over to you. Then, if I'm still alive, I'll run it for you on foreman's wages while you prove that moss doesn't grow on slippery boots."

"That's fair enough," said Drummond.

HE ran over the situation in his mind. There was Julia Lambert, a dark beauty of a bird; there was Tod Lambert, a man he had never seen—Julia's brother. And Tod had helped break his uncle's bank, and therefore he was fighting Tod Lambert. And there was Elaine Jordan, blonde and lithe and lovely, owner of the Bar C, and he was fighting her, too.

He said, "What does this Jib Weldon gent look like, Web?"

Web Drummond described Elaine Jordan's foreman. His words were well-chosen, his images were clear, and Len Drummond suddenly remembered the three men who had stood on Cottonwood's mainstem and watched him. The one had been well-dressed and hard, his eyes had been bestial, and greed had stamped its cruelties on his thin face. And now, Drummond knew that man had been Jib Weldon.

There were many questions to be asked and many to be answered. He told about the holdup at the stage and how he had killed the man and that brought the topic of conversation around to Sheriff Harry Carter.

"Carter wears no man's collar," said Web Drummond. "I've been in this country for quite a few years and he's been the law all that time. He's sittin' back an' waitin' for a break; when it comes he's goin' fill it in an' somebody's goin' pay through the nose."

"He has no favorites?"

"He plays none."

Len Drummond said, "Then we can expect a straight hand from him." He got to his feet and stretched. "Well, I'm plenty tired, Web. That ol' pillow'll look good to this boy."

Web Drummond said, softly, "Then you're takin' my deal?"

"On one condition," said Len Drummond.

Web's heavy brows rose. "And that?"

"That when this is over with, you still own your ranch. An' that it's still in your name, not mine."

"What pay do you want?"

Drummond shrugged and grinned. "Put me on your payroll."

Web Drummond nodded slowly. "As you say, Len. But you're my only kin an' you'll eventually get the place, regardless. But if you like it better the way you say we'll leave it that way. Want a drink?"

Drummond said, "I could stand one."

Latigo Jones went into the kitchen. When he returned he carried a quart of rye. He filled three glasses to the bottom band and they lifted them to the flickering kerosene lamp. Web Drummond tossed his down and the negro followed suit. But Len Drummond looked into the amber liquid and was silent for a moment.

"To the future," he said.

CHAPTER VI

JIB WELDON and three C Bar riders were saddling horses when Tod Lambert rode into the ranch. The hour was well past midnight. The moon rode arced in a sky of flawless color, dotted now and then by brief convection clouds. Beyond the corral lay the sprawled-out buildings of the C Bar; the haystacks and the lifting hills of scrub-pine and buckbrush. Tod Lambert glanced at the bunkhouse. The place was dark.

"What's in the wind, Jib?"

Jib Weldon looked up from the latigo he was tightening and said, "A ride through the night, kid, an' you're comin' along."

Tod Lambert was stiff from the saddle and there was a heaviness across him. He said, "Why not count me out, Jib?"

Jib Weldon looked at him and asked, "Did you hear me, Tod?"

"Okay, Jib," said Tod Lambert. He added, "But why not get one of the other boys?"

"There's the shadow of the noose around your neck," said Jib Weldon. "None of the others—'ept these three here—are in this as deep as you are. If they got caught they might talk to save themselves, but you won't talk—because if you do you'll only make your own case worse." Weldon's eyes were sharp. "What did you tell your sister?"

"I told her," said Tod Lambert, "to go to hell."

Weldon smiled, with his lips only. "She's a purty filly, Tod. You'll have to introduce her to me."

"Sometime," said Tod Lambert and added, under his breath, "Like hell I will. . . " There was a fresh horse in the corral and he laid his hemp on it. A small, thin-legged buckskin gelding, tough and fast. The buckskin snorted as Tod slammed his kak on him, and threaded the latigo strap through the rings. The gelding, wise to the way of the saddle, filled his belly with wind and held it. If he were cinched so full of air, when he contracted his lungs the cinch would be looser. But Tod kicked the beast in the ribs, driving the air from him and, when the wily beast's lungs were deflated, Tod pulled the latigo hurriedly tight and tied it. The buckskin had met his boss, and his actions showed it.

Jib Weldon and his riders were already mounted. They swung out the corral gate and headed toward the south west, riding fast. Jib Weldon led the way and he rode tall against his stirrups, his hands braced against the fork of his saddle. Tod took the drag, wondering just where they were going, and what they were going to do.

They halted their pace once and breathed their horses. The wind was coming from the southwest, bringing with it a coolness as it rolled across the peaks. Tod Lambert glanced down at their tracks, there in the trail; he could read them easily in the moonlight. All of the horses, he noticed, were unshod.

"You pull the plates off'n my buckskin?" he asked.

Jib Weldon nodded. "You can't follow an unshod bronc very well. Lots of wild horses runnin' loose around here and they're all unshod. Be sure and stick the shoes back on him right after we get back to the ranch."

"Let's get movin'," a man said.

LESS than an hour later they pulled up in front of a small log cabin, set back in the hills. This was a C Bar linecamp—here, in the winter, a couple of punchers stayed, and turned weak cattle back so they could not go into the rough country and starve to death. There was no percentage in keeping a hand here during the summer and Tod knew that the cabin was vacant. Jib Weldon and one of the others hit the ground.

"This won't take long," said Weldon.

Soon they returned, carrying two five-gallon cans. Tod Lambert wondered what was in the cans but he did not inquire. Weldon placed his in front of him; it made a heavy splotch where it overlapped and ran down the sides. One of the men rode close and leaned from saddle and tightened the cork.

"Get any on your pants, Jib?"

"No."

They were not riding to the west, now. They were heading directly south. The hills were spending themselves and the land was becoming more level. Tod Lambert drove his buckskin close to Jib Weldon's horse. The sharp odor of kerosene was heavy in the gray dawn.

"Fire?" he asked.

Weldon nodded.

"Web Drummond's haystacks?"

"Sometimes," said Jib Weldon, "you do all right, kid."

"Any risk?"

Weldon said, "There's always a rish. You risk your life walkin' across the road, loadin' a gun, ridin' a horse."

"You're not funny."

Weldon looked suddenly at him, and then he grinned. "Your nerves are ragged, fella. Well, the setup is this: Web Drummond's hay crew finished this section a week ago and moved over on Big Pine crick. They had a guard posted here for a few

days but Curly hasn't been seein' a guard for three days. That means they pulled him out. All we have to do is step in and supply the kerosene and the matches."

"Did Miss Jordan order this?"

"You ask a lot of questions," said Weldon.

"Well, did she?"

Weldon said, "No."

"Then you took it on yourself, huh?"

Weldon said, "Miss Jordan, as you call her, is getting a bad case of cold feet, and her knees are knockin'. I gotta hunch she'd like to pull outa this with a clear hide but she started something she ain't goin' stop. There's too much at stake for a guy named Jib Weldon."

Tod Lambert said, "You got a bottle, Jib?"

"My saddlepocket, left side."

Tod Lambert rode close and loosened the saddlepocket flap and came out with a pint of whiskey. He raised the bottle and drank deeply before handing it to the man on his left. The whiskey was hot in Lambert's belly and he waited for its effect to touch him. He had not eaten for many hours and the liquor hit him hard. The bottle came back to him and he raised it and drank it dry. He made to throw it into the brush but Jib Weldon grabbed it and stuck it back in his saddlepocket.

"Harry Carter has a nose like a fox," he said.

BOXELDER creek ran a few rods behind the haystacks. The haystacks were on level land, about two hundred yards from the rim of the hills, and situated in a bend of Boxelder. They left the hills and rode into the creek and came in along it, their horses splashing in the water. The creek bottom consisted of rocky stretches and riffles, and the running water soon washed away their hoofmarks. Tod Lambert noticed that the spore of wild horses showed along the bank, too.

When they came to a point opposite the haystacks, they pulled in and sat for a long moment, watching the scene that lay beyond the brush. Nothing moved or stirred out there; no sign of life existed.

"Curly was right. No guard." Jib Weldon spoke crisply. "Tod, you stay with me; Jim an' Ike, head that direction. Hank, take the middle. See anybody, shoot first and ask questions later. Got matches?"

They had.

"Okay, then, let's travel."

They dismounted and left their horses with dragging reins. Weldon carried one can; Ike the other. They fanned out, moving silently through the brush. Weldon was going ahead, bent over the heavy can, and Tod followed him.

They came to the edge of the brush and the clearing stretched ahead. They halted there for a long moment and Weldon's eyes were keen and sharp. But time was pressing them; day would soon be here. So Weldon said, "Come along," and started across the clearing.

The others came out now, hurrying and forgetting all precaution. The work lasted only a minute or two: kerosene gurgled from the cans, and the liquid soaked into the base of the heavy stacks, sucked up by the dry bluejoint. They sprinkled it first, and then lit the hay.

The bluejoint had laid for days under the hot sun before being stacked and was thoroughly cured. It had not been in the stack long enough to become hot and to green up. The fire swept through it.

Jib Weldon waited until each stack was fully ablaze, then he ran for his horse where the others already had mounted and were waiting. Still carrying the cans, they loped up the stony bottom of the creek, heading for the point where the creek left the hills.

The dawn was clearer, now; the spray from their hoofs was silvery. They rode for two miles this way, driving their broncs hard. They came then to a spot marked by the hoofs of many horses. Here the range horses came down from the dry hills for water, leaving a dusty trail behind them.

They left the creek at this point, riding the trail left by the unshod

range horses. This ran into the hills and fanned out into nothing and they pushed ahead, riding in a great circle that would eventually return them to the C Bar.

Tod Lambert did not look back.

Jib Weldon glanced back once, just as they entered the hills, and what he saw made him smile. He said, "Well, there goes part of your winter feed, Web Drummond. Pile up some more hay and we'll burn them. Huh, boys?"

Nobody answered.

It was almost five when they rode into the C Bar. Jib Weldon took the cans and buried them under some unground barley in the granary and the others reshod their horses. They turned their horses loose and squatted against the bunkhouse, smoking cigarets. Tod Lambert's head dropped; the world was quiet. Jib Weldon came up and said, "Re-shoe the broncs?"

"Yeap."

"The cook is up," said Weldon. "I see smoke comin' from his chimney. Let's mosey up an' get a cup of Java."

ELAINE Jordan was finishing her first cup of coffee when Jib Weldon came into the room.

"You send for me?" asked Weldon.

Elaine said, "Binnie, may I have some more coffee, please?" and the negress went into the kitchen with Elaine's cup. Weldon scowled and said, "Well?"

"You could take off your hat," said Elaine.

Weldon pulled the Stetson from his head. "All right," he said. "Now we're all set. You have your coffee and I've taken off my hat. Talk."

"I saw you this morning," said Elaine.

Weldon asked, "What do you mean?"

"You and four men rode out and came back just about daybreak. Where did you go; what did you do?"

Weldon said, "You've got good eyes, woman. We burned down Web Drummond's haystacks on the crick."

Elaine was silent for a moment. She had caught her hair in a net; it was shimmering and soft, and Weldon liked it. She wore a tight dressing-gown that clung to her breasts and lay snug against her hips.

She said evenly, "You're through here at the C Bar, Jib Weldon. Rope your horse and ride out. I'll have your check ready for you when you're ready to leave."

Weldon said, "Just like that, huh?" His voice was sharp. "I've been expectin' this for some time. Little Miss Beautiful got her tummy full and now she wants to switch horses. Well, the stream is flowing rapidly, old girl; too damn fast, I think. And you can't change horses in the rapids."

She said, "That's what you say."

"You started this," said Weldon. "You and your damned pride an' that little mean streak of greed you got in that corn-silver hair. I came along and built it up, not for your sake but for mine. I've got all the cards and you haven't got any."

"Harry Carter'll put you off the C Bar."

Weldon said, "He might and he might not." His voice took a new note. "What's the matter, girl?"

She said, "You'll have to go, Jib. And take your killers with you. Or else I'll send for Harry Carter."

"I'll kill Carter."

"He might kill you, though."

Weldon said, "Carter's a bulldog. He hangs on and on and the man's teeth never release. He sinks his teeth into something and something has to give. You know, I think I'll have to kill Carter."

"Are you leaving?"

He shook his head.

For a moment fear touched her, but she kept it from her eyes. She heard Jib Weldon say, "What caused this sudden change?"

"I was wrong from the beginning," she said. "I would have given up soon. I was just a senseless, greedy girl. You came along and took me off my feet. I thought you meant something to me but I found out you mean something to only one person, and that person is Jib Weldon. All right, Jib, if you and your men are not off the C Bar by noon, I'm sending for Harry Carter."

"You'll have to send for him," said Weldon. He added, cynically: "Well, have you had your mornin' say, Elaine?"

"Think it over," she said.

Weldon turned to go and then stopped. "I got too much at stake, woman. The first step was to break Web Drummond's bank—we got young Lambert to do that from the inside. I took the thing out of your hands and played it my way. That took the play away from you and gave it to me. And I aim to play it until the last white chip has crossed the board, regardless of who is winning."

Weldon crossed the porch and stepped into the dust and Elaine moved to the doorway. She said, suddenly: "Jib, here comes somebody."

Weldon stopped and looked at the two riders coming along the valley road, still a few hundred yards away. He said in a quiet voice, "That's the big black, Latigo Jones, an' Len Drummond."

"There's trouble ahead," said Elaine.

Weldon came back to the porch and stood beside her. He ran his mind over last night's marauding; he found no slips, the thing was airtight. "They got guts," he said.

THE guard stationed at the corral had challenged them, then let them ride through. Weldon's eyes were tight and small as he watched them approach. Drummond rode a pace ahead, sitting a big bay; Latigo Jones rode to his right, riding a black gelding. They drew rein in front of the porch and Drummond lifted his hat to Elaine.

"Howdy, Miss Elaine."

She said, "Good morning, Mr Drummond. Won't you come in?"

Drummond said, "Thank you, ma'm, but this ain't what you'd call a social call, I reckon." He looked at Jib Weldon and Elaine Jordan said, "This is Jib Weldon, my foreman. Jib, Mr Len Drummond."

"I saw him in Cottonwood yesterday," said Weldon. He made no move to offer to shake hands.

"The case is this," said Drummond. He spoke to Elaine. "My uncle tells me there's been some sparks between your outfit and his. I'm takin' over the boss job on Web's spread. I thought we might be able to talk this over."

"Yes."

"The setup, the way I understand, is this: you want Web's land and Web only wants to keep his outfit running. He's fighting for survival and you're fighting for expansion. Is that right?"

Jib Weldon answered. "That's about it, Drummond."

Drummond said coldly, "I asked the lady, Weldon."

Weldon's teeth clicked shut and he looked at Elaine Jordan. "I guess," she said, "that is right, Drummond."

"I'll lay the cards on the table," said Drummond. "Web's up against it. Your C Bar owned most of the shares in his bank. When the bank went under he became the possessor of a large debt due the C Bar. If he pays it, he'll have to mortgage his outfit, or give you a note with the ranch as security. Then you'll just as same as own the outfit."

Elaine nodded.

Drummond looked suddenly at Weldon. His eyes were steel and without mercy. He said, "Who burned those haystacks last night?" The question was flat and unexpected.

"What haystacks?" asked Weldon.

Drummond glanced at Latigo Jones. The giant negro had his feet ahead in his stirrups and his hands were close to his guns. His black eyes were inscrutable and without meaning. Drummond returned his gaze to Weldon.

"Don't act dumb, man," he said quietly. "It don't fit in with those purty clothes and that fancy shirt."

Weldon said, "You lookin' for trouble?"

Drummond smiled testily. "I'm lookin' for the man—or the men—who burned my haystacks last night."

Weldon said, sharply, "I don't know anythin' about your hay, Drummond."

Drummons looked at Elaine Jordan. "Is that true?" he asked.

"Why ask me?" she asked.

The thought was bright, suddenly, in Drummond—this girl was evading the question. This told him two things: Weldon had engineered the burning of those stacks, and there was trouble between him and this girl, or otherwise the girl would have made a straight positive answer.

Drummond said, "I think you lie, Weldon."

"Get off that horse," said Weldon, "and then call me that."

Drummond said, to Latigo Jones: "Watch my back," and then he slid from his saddle. Elaine started from the steps. She said, "Now men, none of that—" but Jib Weldon's arm came across her front and took her back.

"I'll handle this, Elaine."

Drummond said, "Why don't you go inside?"

She shook her head.

MEN were coming from the cookshack now. Latigo Jones had both his sixguns out; they hung against his dark hands. He said, "Now don't rush, men, don't rush. 'Cause the first one that does is gettin' lead through his guts. This had to come sooner or later an' it might just as well be now as some other time. Settle back an' enjoy the show, men."

Weldon came forward. There was show and braggadocio in him, but there was steel, too. He said, "Drummond, I'm goin' to take you apart an' see—" and he pushed out his left. The fist came in hard and Drummond went under, expecting the right cross to sneak in. This came and went over him, too, and he fought from a crouch, throwing both fists into Weldon's belly.

He heard the whoosh of Weldon's breath, and Weldon was hurt. But he had been through this before, and he fought harder than ever. Drummond found himself moving backwards; he was blocking, weaving. Weldon jockied him around and Drummond felt the porch railing against his back. He moved along this, letting Weldon follow, and he was playing the man out.

For already the power was leaving Jib Weldon. Drummond heard his breath; it came in gulps, and the man's blows were losing their stunning force. Drummond held that long left arm out, and made Weldon fight from a crouch. This way, Drummond could smash him with uppercuts, and bring that right in hard.

The assembled cowpunchers were offering encouragement to Weldon, but Drummond had neither an eye nor ear for them. Latigo Jones would take care of them. He smashed Weldon back, but Weldon was moving away with the blow, and it did not have its full impact. Then Weldon came in again, making the final effort.

He was slugging, and slugging hard. A fist hit Drummond on the jaw below the ear, and Drummond felt his muscles give. He went in close, making the next go over him, and by that time his head had cleared.

Drummond's wind was coming again, and his eyes were bloody slits. He pushed Weldon around and got him with his back toward the porch and then Weldon was in the right position. The blow rocked him to his heels; the second drove him savagely backward. The rail of the porch caught him across the spine and held him for a moment, then it broke like the report of a thin rifle shell, and Weldon landed on the porch, rough and bloody against the floor.

There was a moment's silence and Drummond looked at his skinned knuckles, grinning ruefully. He lifted his gaze to Latigo Jones' guns and the dark man nodded, his teeth wide splotches. Elaine Jordan was still standing on the porch, the negress beside her, and Drummond looked at her for a tull ten seconds.

"He'll come out of it in a little while," he said.

She said, "I suppose so."

He picked up his hat. "Sorry you had to see it, Miss."

The girl's head was back and her eyes were lidded slightly. She was a picture; she left that picture with Drummond. And he held it to himself, finding it warming and yet, finding in it some distaste, some unhealthiness. She was too hard; the

surface was not deep, and Drummond did not admire brittleness.

She said quietly, "You'd better go."

Drummond put on his hat and walked to his horse and stepped up. His arms were stiff and his lips were swollen. He looked over the assembled C Bar riders with a critical eye and said, "There's nothin' much here, Latigo."

Elaine Jordan said, "They'll not shoot you through the back as you ride away. I'll se to that. The fighting that's done on this ranch is going to be done openly and without concealment."

Drummond said, "I'll hold you to that, Miss," and touched his horse with his spurs.

CHAPTER VII

DRUMMOND and Latigo Jones reached Cottonwood when the sun was climbing toward the noon time. Drummond had wanted to look over this range and he took his time at it; he found out that this was a good range.

Though the first lush grass of spring had turned to cured foliage, there was plenty of feed on this range, and that feed was the best. A number of creeks cut their ways across the bottomlands, heading for the Milk River. Some of these ran the whole year around but most of them did not flow during the hot summer months unless the rainfall that season was more than usual. But those that did not flow all the time were still substantial sources of water. The water collected in waterholes and some springs were open the entire year.

Drummond found cattle around these springs, and he sent an appreciative eye over them. Web Drummond had quite a few three and four-year-old steers. They were mostly Hereford stock, white-faces. But there were also a number of mongrel breeds—roans, duns, spotted, and blacks.

"Web done bought some Canady cattle a few years back," explained Latigo Jones. "Them cows was mixed breeds an' they throwed them calves. But they got meat on 'em, them steers. Shore, they won't draw top rates on the market, but they'll drag down good tonnage. What they lack in quality they make up in tonnage."

According to Web, the cattle would be driven into Glasgow, the county aeat, and shipped out of there on the newly built railroad, the Great Northern. They went either to Chicago or Minneapolis, but the best market was Chicago.

Because of the heat, the cattle were gathere' around waterholes, browsing in the shade of boxelders and cottonwoods and diamond willows. A few of them snorted and bolted when Drummond and Latigo Jones came upon the scene, but for the most part they were rather tame cattle. That was because they had been fed in feeding-lots during the winter when the snow was too deep to rustle their own feed.

Drummond ran his gaze to the northern foothills. These came down at a long slope, finally joining the valley floor. They were dim and gray, shimmering under the heat. Back there were some of Web Drummond's cattle, and those cattle were wilder. They would be hard to gather: they were spooky, and the terrain was rough. Cut coulees and cliffs and badlands and gullies. According to Latigo Jones, that section had not been worked for two years.

"Them dogies was wild then, Drummond," said the black man, shaking his heavy head dolefully, "an' I sure figure they'll be wilder now. But if Web says to work the country, it's goin' be worked."

"I reckon so," said Drummond tonelessly.

When they rode into the livery-barn the old hostler said, "Thought you was goin' to bring my horse back today, young feller?"

Drummond looked at Latigo Jones and grinned. "By gosh, we plumb forgot about it, ol' timer. You can wait a day or two, can't you?"

"That horse is my whiskey horse," said the oldster.

Drummond's brows rose. "Whiskey horse?"

"Yeah. The money I get by rentin' him out is all clear an' it keeps me in licker. I calls him my redeye pony."

Drummond nodded. "How about a pint for recompense when I leave town."

"Don't give it to recompense, give it to me." The old man looked at Latigo. "Dang, but I'm sure gettin' to be a bum, huh?"

"Sure terrific," said Latigo, sadly.

SHERIFF Harry Carter was saddling a horse in front of his office when he saw Drummond and Latigo. He dropped the latigo strap through the ring and said, "Looks like you saved me a ride, Drummond. Was goin' out to look into the burning of your haystacks. Tony Westcott just told me about it."

"No use ridin' out that way," said Drummond. He was silent for a long moment. "They never left any tracks or any clues."

"Who do you figure did it?"

Drummond lifted his eyes. "The C Bar, of course."

Carter took this into his mind, but it was not new to him. He shrugged and said, "You could swear out a warrant and I'd hail Elaine and Jib Weldon into court. But that wouldn't do us any good because we haven't any direct evidence."

"That's right," said Drummond.

"That's the way with a case like this," said Carter. "Things run along and there's no opening and then suddenly somebody'll forget and you can put your head in the hole. Somebody'll make an error, soon."

"I figure so," said Drummond.

Carter looked at Drummond's face. "I suppose you walked into a swinging door," he said. "And there ain't one west of Saint Paul."

"It was a door all right," agreed Drummond. "But Jib Weldon was swinging it, and it was made up of his fists." He told the sheriff about the fight at the C Bar that morning and Carter's eyes were points of fine ice.

"Can't see what got over Elaine," said Carter, "lettin' that fellow run her outfit. Too bad ol' Otto Jordan ain't livin'. He'd run the tail off'n that Weldon fella gettin' him off the C Bar. Otto had two fists and a temper and he used both of them. The girl's got guts, though."

Drummond asked, "What time's the inquest?"

"Set for one."

"Miss Lambert to be a witness?"

"She saw the holdup."

"And Elaine Jordan?"

"I've subpoenaed her," said Carter. "The dead man rode a C Bar horse."

"I'll be seein' you," murmured Drummond.

Drummond went into a saloon and bought a pint for the old livery-barn hostler, and then they went to the general store. The roundup wagon was starting in a few days; just as soon as the bank examiners arrived and went over the books for the final accounting. The store-keeper was a middle-aged man with a strong face and a touch of gray.

He said, "I'm a great friend of your uncle's, Drummond."

Drummond outlined the needs of the roundup and the man jotted down articles. "I'll have to order some horseshoes from Great Falls. They should be here in about four days. They might have some at the hardware store."

Latigo said, "They ain't got none, Len. I was over there a few days back, an' they was plumb out. We got a couple of dozen out the ranch, those'll be enough to start the wagon rollin', an' we can pick these up later on."

OUT on the street, they met Julia Lambert. Drummond took off his hat and said, "How are you today?"

"Fine. And you?"

Drummond fingered a swollen lip. "Horse kicked me," he said, smiling. He introduced Latigo Jones. "Have you had dinner?"

"No, I was just going to the cafe."

"Then let's make it the three of us," said Drummond. They took a booth; Drummond sat where he could see the door. Julia marked this act; it was singular of the man. They ordered.

"You in for the inquest?" asked

Julia. Drummond nodded and she continued with, "I'm sort of nervous. Getting up before strangers. . . "

"That won't be hard," said Drummond. "All you have to do is just answer the questions. Have you seen your brother yet?"

She looked at him. "Yes."

He said, "He works for the C Bar, I understand."

"Yes," she said quietly. "That makes him your enemy?"

Drummond leaned back. He let this run through his mind: she was dark and warm, and her brother worked for Elaine Jordan, and that made him his enemy. "I guess so," he murmured. "And you, Miss Lambert?"

"What do you mean?"

He put it bluntly. "Where do you stand?"

"He's my brother," she said.

"This is hard and tough," said Drummond evenly. "There'll be lead exchanged, and maybe somebody will die. And it might be him."

"We all have to die."

Drummond looked at her and then said, "I reckon so," and let it go at that. The town was slowly filling with men and rigs; the word had gone out about the stage holdup, and curiosity was drawing them into town. Elaine Jordan rode in, alone, sitting her sorrel; later the C Bar men came, with Jib Weldon leading them and Tod Lambert riding at Weldon's left.

Sheriff Harry Carter stood in front of his office. He took the scene into his mind, and he drew its summation. There could be trouble in this town between Weldon and Drummond, and then Carter saw Weldon closer and saw Weldon's face. The marks there caused him to change his mind about the urgency of that trouble. Weldon's eyes were almost swollen shut and a man can't shoot straight when he has a hard time seeing. . .

THE inquest was held in the large lobby of the Taylor House. The three coffins were brought in and placed on saw-horses and the witnesses filed past them to get to the witness chair. The lobby was filled with chairs and even a few tables were brought in from the dining room. Some of the cowboys sat on these and smoked cigarets and said little.

The stage-driver was the first to be called. He identified the bodies of the salesman and the thin man and told of their deaths. Julia Lambert also corroborated his evidence. She looked small and thin in the big chair, and Drummond saw that she was tired. She spoke in a low voice and then resumed her seat beside Drummond. Elaine Jordan came in and sat down on the other side of Drummond.

"I'm late," she said huskily.

Drummond said in a low voice, "Have you met Miss Lambert? Miss Lambert, Miss Elaine Jordan."

Julia murmured, "How do you do?"

"You are Tod's sister, aren't you?"

Julia nodded.

"I suppose," said Elaine, "that I'll be seeing more of you, Miss Lambert?"

"Perhaps."

Drummond said, "They want you on the stand, Elaine."

Elaine Jordan was going through the throng. She was a woman, and there was no tiredness about her. She took the stand and went through the preliminaries. The district attorney, a slender young man, was conducting the hearing.

"You saw the three dead men, Miss Jordan," he said. "Did you recognize any of them?"

"No."

The attorney's brows rose. "But one of them was riding a C Bar horse, Miss Jordan. And the C Bar is your brand, is it not?"

"It is."

"You saw this horse, did you not?"

"I did."

"You admit he was your animal?"

"I do."

"Then why would this man—the highway man—be riding your horse? Or did you sell it to him?"

"I never saw the man before in my life. That is, until yesterday in Sheriff Carter's office."

"How did he get your horse?"

"That particular horse was running

on government range. The dead man could have corraled him at a number of corrals and saddled him and rode him to the holdup."

The attorney looked at Sheriff Carter. "Have you and questions, sheriff?"

"No," Carter said.

"Then call Mr Drummond."

Drummond took the stand. He verified the identification of the three dead men. He told what he knew about the drummer. He told about the letter his uncle had written him—the letter he had never received. The robbers, he said, probably figured that the drummer was himself, and thaat the salesman's bag contained the money he was supposed to bring in for his uncle.

"Then you mean, sir," said the attorney, "that perhaps your uncle's letter was somehow intercepted in the mails and opened and read and that therefore the unknown bandits were on the lookout for you and this money?"

"It could happen," said Drummond.

"Who, sir, would you think would be guilty of such a crime?"

Drummond said, easily, "The C Bar."

Somebody coughed softly and Drummond lifted his eyes, letting them run across the assembly. They were on Elaine Jordan, but there was nothing in her eyes or face, so they lifted to Jib Weldon, who sat angling a chair against the far wall, but he saw no sign of anger there, either.

"Have you any direct evidence sir?"

Drummond said, "No, I haven't."

"Then that statement," said the attorney, "is entirely out of line."

DRUMMOND said, clearly, "I'm here to take over my uncle's ranch. The C Bar is pressing him hard and I'm here to fight for him. I want to lay this matter before you and Sheriff Carter. We Drummonds are watching our actions and the actions of our men. But, if the C Bar steps on us, we're out to get even." His eyes were on Harry Carter.

Carter said, "I'm the sheriff, Drummond."

"You work with me," said Drummond, "and I'll work with you."

Carter said levelly, "I do as my office sees fit for me to do. If you step over the line one inch I'm after you, Drummond. If the C Bar does the same, I've got a bone with them."

"That's your duty," said Drummond.

The attorney looked at Carter and asked, "Have you any questions?" and Carter shook his head. Drummond walked to his seat and sat down. The jury—consisting of six men—filed into a side-room. Elaine Jordan's voice was cynical.

"You talk a good fight, Mr Drummond."

Drummond nodded.

"You're blunt."

"I try to be."

Elaine got to her feet and moved down the aisle, stopping at the door as the jury returned. Drummond murmured to Julia Lambert, "Maybe I was too rough."

Julia said quietly, "I don't think so." She added, "You've got a job ahead of you, Mr Drummond."

Drummond closed his eyes and leaned back, listening to the coroner read the verdict. The salesman and the thin man had been murdered by the guns of unknown assailants, and John Doe warrants would be sworn out for these assailants, to be served by Sheriff Harry Carter when the right moment arrived and the identities of the killers were known.

The third man had been killed by Len Drummond, while Drummond had been recovering his stolen property, and no charge was to be filed against him, for he fought and killed in the line of self-preservation and protection of his personal property.

Drummond got to his feet and walked out, escorting Julia Lambert. He looked across the top of the girl's dark hair and his eyes met those of Jib Weldon's. For a moment Weldon's gaze was on his, and Drummond nodded slightly. But Weldon did not nod back, and Drummond, seeing that his cynical gesture had its

effect, let a thin smile touch his lips. . .

CHAPTER VIII

JIB WELDON kept Elaine Jordan in the rim of his sight, never letting her from his eyes. The man named Ike was with him and Ike said, "I guess she knows where she stands now, since Drummond had his talk."

Weldon nodded.

Ike nodded, too. He was a fat man, too fat; that showed he had not spent too much time in the saddle, he had occupied himself in front of bars. But he was a dangerous man and he was sure of his share in this.

Weldon moved across the crowd and stood beside Sheriff Carter. The lawman nodded and Weldon returned the salutation. Carter went out on the street and Weldon followed him. He stood in front of the hotel and watched Carter until the latter had entered his office, and then Weldon watched the office to see who entered it.

Time ran and flowed its course, and Weldon had his thoughts. The stakes were big, and he wanted big stakes; and he would win. The town was thinning out and men and rigs were leaving, the dust thin behind them as they headed for distant ranches. Four men were carrying the coffins from the hotel to the undertaker in the rear of the hardware store.

"When you goin' to buy them?" asked Weldon.

"Two of them are goin' be seeded this evenin'," said a man. "Just as soon as it gets cool enough to dig the graves. The drummer is goin' to St. Louis, seems as if he had a wife there. Carter must've contacted her."

Weldon dismissed the thought of the salesman, and glanced at the Mercantile. Elaine Jordan was coming from the store and he went forward and said, "You leavin' for home, Elaine?"

"Yes."

"What have you in that bundle?"

"Material to make a dress."

Weldon said, "That's a sight I always like to see—a pretty woman makin' a pretty dress." They went to their horses and mounted and rode out of town together. They went this way for almost a mile and an irritation arose in Jib Weldon. He said, almost crossly, "Why don't you talk?"

"Why should I?"

Weldon looked at her. "You never talked to Harry Carter." It was no question, it was a statement.

"No."

"Why didn't you?"

She said, "Drummond is in this and he's tough. He told me what he was here for, on that witness stand, and he told the town. You know what he intends to do?"

"I have an idea."

"He's going to run a roundup wagon out in the rough country and gather those wild Drummond cattle and ship them. When you burned his hay you made his winter feed short so he can't feed as many head this winter. Web Drummond claims he is going to pay off every cent to the stockholders who lost in his bank. That means he will pay off the C Bar, too."

"He can't do it. He has no credit."

"No," said Elaine, "he has no credit. But he has some fine cattle . . . and he has Len Drummond."

"Why should that alter the situation so much?"

Elaine Jordan did not answer that but she said simply, "I'm through fighting, Jib. I'll wait. If the note comes due before they pay, then I'll own the Drummond ranch. If they pay before the note is due I'll have my money." She looked at Weldon. "And you?"

Weldon said, "I'll fight with everything at hand—with guns, knives, legality, or fists. Carter's the man I'm watchin' and I'm watchin' him close. Drummond is tough but he's young, Carter is tough and he has age to toughen him and sharpen him. No, I keep on fighting."

"With C Bar men? No, Jib."

WELDON murmured, "There are no C Bar men; they're Weldon men. Why don't you keep your eyes open, woman. They're my

men and they'll ride with me."

"As long as you can pay their wages, yes."

"I'll pay their wages." Weldon leaned against his stirrups, his eyes touched with irony. "You see, Miss Elaine, you're in my hands. You're afraid to talk to Carter because you know so much you would probably feel the hand of the law, too. It isn't a nice mess, Elaine. It is, in fact, rather sticky." He added, "And bloody, too."

Elaine said, "What will you do with Tod Lambert?"

Weldon shrugged. "I have the answer to that." He asked, "Why do you ask? Lambert is all right."

"He has a sister, Jib. That sister likes Len Drummond. She's cute and sharp and she's there. I've seen *like* change into something more potent. Tod will talk to her; every brother's bound to tell his big sister something. She might tell it to Drummond. And then what?"

Weldon settled back into his saddle. "I've thought of that, too," he said. His eyes were sharp on her. "You seem to like this Drummond fellow too, it seems."

"On what do you base that?"

"I have eyes," said Jib Weldon, "and though they haven't seen such a lot of time, they've seen enough."

"You talk smooth . . ."

Weldon rolled a cigaret. He drew the smoke into his lungs and tasted of its coolness. He let it roll through his nostrils and when he opened his mouth it hung before him.

"I bought the old Circle Y outfit today, Elaine."

She looked at him sharply. "Who from?"

"Jess Williams had the sale of it, the heirs back East had commissioned him to sell it."

"But what about Web Drummond's lease?"

"There was a clause in it. When the place was sold, Drummond's lease would be automatically broken."

"Where did you get the money?"

His eyes met hers. There was a tangible cynicism in his; she read it, and the implication of his words told her she was thinking correctly.

"I have men and horses and guns," he said simply. "The sun goes down and the darkness still comes in. And besides, Tod Lambert lent me some money." He leaned forward across his fork and there was silent laughter in him. "That means that I'm a landowner and I have my roots down deep."

"There are other regions, Jib."

He pulled the air into his lungs, he held it, he tasted it. "When I was young my folks were poor," he said. "We lived on a dirt Texas cotton farm and we had poverty. I fought my way out of that—my dad had me farmed out to another farmer—and I killed a man to do it. The trail since then has been long and I've sat my horse on many a high ridge, looking to the south and west and east and north. I came here; this was the place, and I knew it. And when I met you, I knew for sure."

"They'll bury you here."

"That," said Jib Weldon, "is all right with me—just so they don't bury me too soon . . ."

Elaine Jordan thought, the man has conceit and yet he has strength. You could like him without the conceit but you couldn't love him because of his selfishness . . . He'll let passion and ambition drive him and it will in result cause his downfall. But it will never break his egotism and his strength and spirit . . .

She glanced at him then; he was riding silently, watching the ground. And his face, though swollen from Drummond's fists, showed the pull, the tug of his thoughts, and his eyes were without expression.

Things were moving fast upon this range, and Elaine gave her thoughts to this. Julia Lambert was here and so was Drummond; she remembered them there in the hotel as she entered, and Drummond had been talking to the girl, his voice low and filled with heaviness. She had said to herself then, *So that's the way things are shaping up,* and she had moved forward and sat beside Drummond and she knew why she had sat there, despite the fact that people were wondering about her actions:

she had wanted to break into their conversation and become a part of it.

These thoughts were with her, now —and they held some comfort, but the assurance was overbalanced by doubt and skepticism; and she said to herself, *Elaine, be careful; be careful, girl . . . You can go overboard and you can get hurt and it may take a lifetime to outgrow it and then you may have it the rest of your life. Watch your step and your blood and walk the narrow and don't let this run away with you.* And then another voice was telling her the opposite.

* * * *

THE fat man was not used to riding, and already he was getting saddle-boils. He met Web Drummond in front of the house and Web looked at him in surprise. "Step down an' rest your saddle, Williams."

Jess Williams spat tobacco juice at the dust. "I onct get off'n this bronc, Web, an' I'd never get back on again. How's the wooden hosses an' you gettin' along?"

"I can navigate 'em," said Web, "but I sure wouldn't have no footwork if somebody pressed me. You out ridin' for your health?"

"I've sold the ol' Circle Y outfit."

"Yeah. Who to?"

"Jib Weldon."

Web Drummond said grimly, "So he's buyin' in to the valley, huh? That gent must figure he's here to stay. Well, he might be, at that . . . six feet under. What terms did he make, Jess?"

"I ain't at liberty to say, Web. When I swore out my real estate oath—"

"T'hell with the oath. Start talkin'!"

"He paid cash."

"How much?"

"Now I ain't got no right to talk about my client's—"

"Client, hell! How much?"

"Fifteen thousand."

Web Drummond's eyes clouded over and he murmured, "That's a lot of money, Jess. Wonder where he got it?"

"I didn't ask. I accept American currency."

"You don't reckon he got it outa my bank, do you?"

"I didn't ask."

Web Drummond smiled at the man's stiffness. He said, "I suppose that calls for me to pull my stock and hayhands off there, huh?"

"Your lease reads that way."

"I've put up part of the hay crop. I get to move that, don't I?"

"Your lease says so."

"Okay," said Web Drummond. "I lived before I leased that Circle Y; I can still have range to run cattle. You want a drink?"

"I never drink."

"You danged ol' fibber," said Web Drummond. "I've seen you so loaded down you was draggin' your snozzle on the plank walk. What's the matter with you?"

"My liver," said Jess Williams. He turned his horse and said, "So long, Web. Hope the next time I see you you're on your feet."

WEB hobbled down to the corral where Len Drummond and Latigo Jones were shoeing saddle-horses. Drummond did the roping. The broncs would run by and he would pick out the one he wanted. His loop would lay flatly against the dust; the horse's front feet would move into it, and he would plant his feet, boots down. The horse hit the end of the rope and piled up.

Latigo was on the critter's neck, pulling the head around; Drummond tied three feet, leaving the fourth dangling. Web crutched around to where the horse was laying and looked through the corral bars.

"How's it comin'?"

"Little by little," said Drummond. He was trimming the bronc's hoofs with a pair of nippers, cutting the extra hoof off so the shoe would fit snug. "See you had some company, Web."

"That was Jess Williams. He handles real estate down in Cottonwood. He just sold the Circle Y to Jib Weldon. That means my lease is up." He hollered across the corral at a rider. "Hey, Mike, get over to the

Circle Y haycamp. Tell the boys the lease is bought out an' to lead the hay they've cut an' take it over on Sunken crick an' stack it there."

"Okay, Web."

Latigo Jones spat and wiped his black forehead. "That ain't much good news, Web, seein' they ain't been much rain this summer."

"We'll make it," said Web. "What I'm wonderin' about is where did Weldon get the fifteen thousand to pay cash for it? Or did I buy it for him?"

Drummond asked, "What do you mean, Web?"

"Well, Tod Lambert worked in my bank, now Tod rides with Jib Weldon. Weldon only had a clean pair of levis when he came into Milk river. Now he shows up with a hell of a lot of more money than I have ...anyway, I have at the present time."

Drummond fitted a shoe. He stuck a handful of nails in his mouth. "Hang onto his neck, Latigo. Here goes." He drove a nail in, clinched it over, cut it to length. "There's a lot that'll come out later, Web," he mumbled through the nails.

"Damn," said Web, "an' I have to sit around with this set of wooden pins." He banged a crutch against a corral post.

"Better be careful with them crutches," warned Latigo Jones. "I had to ride clean to Circle to get them—only pair this side of Miles City. You break one of those an' it'll be almost impossible to get another."

"I'm goin' up to the house," said Web. "Damned if I'm goin' stand here an' watch you gents do somethin' I can't do. I'm mixin' me a cold drink, by jupiter. When you pullin' the wagon out, Len?"

"Coupla more days," said Drummond.

"I'm a-ridin' with you," said Web. "I'm sittin' my rear on the back of Latigo's bed wagon with my wooden shoes smack beside me. You expectin' any trouble, Len?"

Drummond said, quietly, "We get these cattle into town and we can sell them pronto for top prices. Not many cattle being sold at this time of the season and the buyers want to keep the packing houses running. I wish those bank examiners would show how much your bank is in debt."

"Tom Connoers rode past this mornin'," said Web. "They come last night an' got to work this mornin'. Ought to have their verdict in a few days; two at the most, I'd say. But you didn't answer me. How much trouble do you expect?"

"We're packin' plenty of shells, Web."

"Weldon'll hit," said Web Drummond. "He's got plenty at stake." He turned and pegged his way toward the house. Latigo Jones watched him go.. "Them wooden pegs are jus' breakin' ol' Web's heart," he said.

"He'll sit a horse soon," said Drummond. "He ain't lettin' this wagon roll out without him."

"She'll be a tough row to hoe," said the Negro.

THE black man was right in his sumnation, and Len Drummond knew it. For one thing, they were short-handed; Web had cut expenses to the bone. Usually the Indians and breeds from the Belknap reservation did the putting up of hay, but this summer cowpunchers—men who had once sworn never to callous their hands on hayforks—were putting up the native bluejoint, and cursing as they pitched it onto hayracks. They were doing it for Web Drummond, because old Web was flat on his back and damned near bankrupt.

A few of them had even tried to talk Web out of paying the debts incurred by the closure of his bank, but they had soon given up that idea. Web Drummond came of the old school; a debt was a debt and it would have to be paid. Some of them went deeper into the case, and saw why Web Drummond was so adamant.

For there was a pride in this man. It was not a selfish pride; it was broad and healthy. Drummond viewed it from his uncle's standpoint. Web had drifted across the years and he had ridden beyond the rim of the law—he had been cursed and feared

and hated, and then his wildness had become satiated, and he had turned to peace. And in that peace he had found a great satisfaction. People had had faith in him and his bank; they had left their money there, and in turn Tod Lambert and the other clerk had betrayed him, and they had betrayed Web Drummond to the people who trusted him.

Now, Web was determined to regain that lost trust by paying back his stockholders, and reopening his bank.

Drummond and Latigo Jones finished shoeing the horses late that afternoon. They did not run out of horses, they ran out of shoes. The rest of the Drummond hands that were not on haycrews were out riding bog holes and scouting the rough country where the roundup was to be staged.

While Drummond strung a new canvas across the bed-wagon, Latigo started repairing harnesses. The black man squatted on the ground, using a Myers sewing awl and lacing breeching with water-soaked rawhide that had lost the hair. He pulled the stitching tight with his white teeth.

Drummond stretched the canvas solidly, working from the front of the wagon to the rear. He nailed the sides down, using a green diamond willow for railing. He drove nails through this into the wagon box. The bows were made of fresh willows he had cut along the creek bottom.

The sun was hot, scorching the brown earth. Devil twists lay across the alkali beds to the west, whirling like dusty geysers into the hot afternoon. Down in the corral a horse stomped, his hoofs heavy with his new shoes, and the stallion, in his corral back of the barn, was neighing and circling his small enclosure.

The chickens were resting in the shade of the cottonwoods, rolling in the dust. Ducks squatted in the brush surrounding the water-hole below the corrals. Mushmouth, the mongrel collie, lay under the wagon, stretched out and twitching as he dreamed.

Drummond ran his gaze over all this, and he smiled. Web Drummond had plenty of farm animals, but he didn't have a milk cow. Web came from the old school, all right; only milk in the house came from a can. He always had claimed you couldn't hire a cowboy who'd stoop so low to menial chores as to milk a cow and he was too danged old and too proud to pump one himself.

Latigo Jones put the last stitch in a bridle. "Reckon this harness ought to do the chore now, Len." He got to his feet and stretched. "Danged near time for chow. Here comes a rider."

Drummond looked at the man who was still two hundred yards away and asked, "You know him?"

"Looks like Tom Connoers. He's probably headin' for his linecamp on Casche crick. Been to town. Web was talkin' to him when he rode through this mornin'."

Connoers rode up to the porch and talked to Web for some time. Neither Drummond nor Latigo Jones could hear what was said. Then Connoers rode off and Web hobbled down to them. He had a long paper in his hand.

"Connoers brought me out a statement on the bank. The examiners have finished their work. I owe my stockholders a little over eighty-five thousand, and the bank can open again."

"How many head of cattle back in the rough country?" asked Drummond.

"Those steers will be worth about a hundred bucks a head," said Web. "That means we have to gather eight hundred and fifty. Think there's that many there, Latigo?"

"Might be; might not."

"What else did Connoers say?" asked Drummond.

"Harry Carter's still lookin' for a man to serve those John Doe warrants on. But he's got a real warrant to serve, now. You see, those bank examiners swore out a warrant charging Tod Lambert with embezzlement."

CHAPTER IX

CARTER came into the C Bar that afternoon, but he had not ridden hard. The pace from Cottonwood had been easy, and his thoughts were many. There was nobody at the corrals and bunkhouses and he rode to the porch and stepped down. Elaine Jordan came out and he said, "How do you do, Miss Elaine."

She wore a simple housedress. She said, "Who are you after, Harry Carter?"

Carter frowned and said, "Do I always have to be after somebody, Elaine? Is that it—that I'm a human bloodhound?"

Elaine said suddenly, "I'm sorry."

Carter had known her since babyhood. He said gruffly, "You're a beautiful woman, Elaine. If I was twenty years younger I'd show these young bucks a wild race." He spread his hands—they were rough and hard. "But time's crept up and that eliminates me. Where's Tod Lambert?"

"So you're after him, is that it?"

"Did I say I was after him? I just asked where he was."

"He's with Jib Weldon."

"Where's Weldon?"

"I don't know. He rode out about noon. Tod was with him. He might have gone to the Circle Y. He bought that, you know."

"How you getting along?"

She looked at him. "What do you mean?"

He said, "Elaine, you can't run a bluff on me. You're into this, and you're in deep, too deep for your comfort. Your pride got you into it and it's keeping you into it. Why don't you pull out before the trouble really starts?"

She said, "That's my business, Harry Carter."

"And mine, too," said Carter, "and the business of every man and woman and child in the basin. Don't put your pride before your good sense and logic, girl. When you do that you're betraying yourself." He donned his hat and climbed up and turned his horse. "Good day, Elaine."

She said, "Goodbye," and he rode away, squat in his saddle. She watched him for some time; he was riding toward the Circle Y, and then the hills hid him from her, and she went into the house. Carter rode at that same slow pace. His horse at a running-walk, and Carter deep between fork and cantle. He was steady and sure and strong, and this showed in him.

He cast his glance across the range, reading the amount of grass, how closely it had been grazed, how much more feed it would afford. He lifted his glance to the horizon and there was no rain there and then he looked again at the grass. He said to himself, *We need rain and we need it bad . . .* He turned his thoughts to the present and another thought said, *She's a woman—a beautiful woman—and she is going to be hurt bad. You can't play both ends against the middle and win. You got to play the game square and abide by the rules of God and nature or else you pay the penalty. She's going to lose and it's going to raise hell with her . . .*

Or is she?

Some C Bar men were stringing barbwire across a cut-coulee and he drew in and asked, "What's the wire for?"

"Spring back there, Carter, an' it's boggy aroun' it. Might lose some cattle. You lookin' for somebody?"

Carter sent his eyes over the three men and guessed at something they were trying to hide. "Where's Weldon?"

"He's up to the house."

Carter turned his horse and rode that direction. The Circle Y buildings were settled along a creek in the boxelders and the shade was thick. Carter stirred in saddle, feeling the coolness. He rode past the corral and the barn and saw Jim Weldon digging a post-hole beside the well. He turned his horse that direction and then Weldon saw him and looked up. Weldon said, "Hello, sheriff."

Carter nodded and said, "Howdy, Weldon," and looked at the hole Weldon was digging. He had not been digging long; the auger had scarcely bitten the earth. Carter thought, *He hasn't been working here*

long and this looks like a set-up job . . . for him . . . He set himself back in his saddle and asked, "Where's Tod Lambert?"

"He ain't here," said Weldon.

"Where did he go?"

"I don't know."

CARTER said, "He left the C Bar with you, Weldon. When did he leave here and which direction did he go?"

Weldon asked, easily, "Why do you want him?"

"I got a warrant for his arrest. The charge is embezzlement."

"He came over here with me," said Weldon. "First thing I knew he was gone. I didn't even see which direction he went, Carter."

Carter put both hands on his horn and pushed his body back against the cantle. He said, "You have good eyes, Weldon, and you should have seen which way he went."

"Sometimes," said Weldon, "I get sort of temporarily blind. There are times when I can't see much. And then, there are times when I see a lot, Carter."

"Who warned Lambert?" asked Carter."

"Warned him? Of what?"

Carter felt the stirrings of anger, but he put them aside. He said, "You've had a spy in town. He's heard about this warrant. While I rode to the C Bar he's ridden directly to you. That gave Lambert his start." Carter lifted his head; he read the sun. "Won't be long till sundown."

"It sure won't," said Weldon.

Carter said, "I could pick up his tracks but the darkness would hide him. You know, Weldon, I've started after a few men in my time, and I've run every one of them down to earth. Those I couldn't catch I trapped. A man is like a wild animal—there is always a moment when he loses, and that is when he steps into a trap, or discretion outweighs his judgment." He said, as a matter of fact, "I'll get young Lambert."

"Good luck," said Weldon.

Carter looked at him and held his arrogance in his mind, but he never underestimated this man. Weldon was tough and he was hard and the shell was deep and powerful. Carter knew this, he appreciated it, and it was with him all the time. He said almost wearily, "Somebody will have to kill you some day, Weldon, and it may be me."

"I've thought of that, too," said Weldon.

"You think right up there," admitted Carter. A tiredness was on him; he had seen this before, and seen it many times. He had ridden far and accomplished nothing, but there was no resentment in him. He had a job to do, and it was not a pleasant job, but he would do it because it was his job. His attainment of that had been temporarily postponed, but that did not mean he would not accomplish it.

"Ride carefully, Weldon," he advised.

He turned his horse then, and he rode away. Jib Weldon's eyes, he knew, were on his back; he played with this thought, and then dismissed it. Dusk was falling and the coolness was spreading across this land. It came on a fine thin wind, moving the heat and stuffiness before it; it touched his cheeks and made them cool. He shoved back his hat and the wind moved across his wide forehead and brought coolness.

He was a part of the game, he had been called to play a role; this stage was the frontier, unbound and limitless in space. His part was laid out before him and destiny spoke his lines. They were all involved and through this ran the fine thread of action, and soon that action would flare and light the night. He thought of this and he thought of Len Drummond. There was a girl in Cottonwood and she was like a bird—she was dark, she was deep, she was bright. He wanted her brother, and perhaps he would have to kill her brother, and she would look at him then, and her eyes would show no friendship.

A hell of a job, he thought, *with no thanks.*

You hew to the line and you make an enemy. There was another girl, too—she was light, but the lines

around her eyes were too hard. There were these two, and they were against each other, and one would have to give. He had seen it at the inquest yesterday: a man had moved into their lives and this man and circumstance were separating them before they had even become friends. This was part of the unfolding scheme of life: it had no beginning, no middle, no end. It came from nowhere and went across space and ended nowhere. But in the midst of this was a certain duty—each man had this outlined for him at birth, and fate pulled the strings. And sometimes that duty was not pleasant.

YOU held that thought to yourself, though. You built between yourself and other men a wall of reserve; this wall was not high, because no human wall was high—but it was sufficient, because man was not strong.

Carter rode into the Drummond ranch and had supper. He looked at Len Drummond across the plank table covered with oilskin and he said, "It looks like you'll have to kill a few men. . ."

Drummond murmured, "It does."

"Yes," said Carter; he added, "I'll probably have to, also."

The night was dark when Jib Weldon reached Cottonwood. He had not ridden fast; there was no sweat on his gray. He had left the Circle Y at late afternoon and had ridden the loop and stopped off at the C Bar but Tod Lambert was not there, either. So he had turned the gray toward Cottonwood.

He had thought the matter through, and what he had once reasoned had become plainly apparent. Tod Lambert had run his course and done his work and now that time had arrived. He knew too much; he had reached the end of the rope and there was no more.

Cottonwood was without motion. It was the middle of the week and the haycrews were out and the cowpunchers were slung around, too far to come into town except on Saturday or Sunday. The stores were closed and the two saloons and poolhalls had lights. Weldon glanced into one as he rode upstreet and saw a few old cronies around a table and a solitary customer at the bar. A couple of young blades were shooting a listless game of pool and that was all.

Weldon leaned back in his saddle. This would be, he thought, a bad time to do any shooting. The town was so quiet a bullet report would bring everybody to its source. He played with this thought, wondering how the thing would work out, what the cause and effect would bring about.

He left his horse in front of the hotel and went inside and said to the clerk, "Hello, friend. Miss Lambert in her room?"

"She ain't here no more, Jib. She's two doors down the street in the old jewelry store. She lives in the back quarters, I reckon."

Weldon frowned and asked, "What's she doin' there?"

"She's started a sewin' shop. Takin' in sewin'. My missus says she sews a fine seam, too."

Weldon murmured, "Thanks," and went down the street. The front of the place was dark so he went between the two buildings to the alley. He stood there for a moment, dark against the weathered building, and looked up and down the alley, thinking that here would be a good place to kill a man. There was a light showing from under the low-pulled blind and he went to the door and knocked.

A woman's voice said, "Who's there?"

"Jib Weldon." He added, "I want to speak to you, Miss Lambert."

The door opened then and he entered. The room was small but clean and it showed pride and femininity. Weldon held his Stetson and thought of that: there was a softness in this room, and the rooms of Elaine Jordan had been well-kept, but they were not soft and feminine.

"Do you know who I am, Miss Lambert?"

Julia Lambert said, "I've seen you on the streets and at the inquest. Do you know where Tod is? Have you brought me news of him?"

Weldon looked at her for ten seconds and said, "No, I don't. The fact is, I came here to ask you if you had seen him. It's three days now since that warrant was sworn out for him. And I haven't seen him since he rode for the hills, about an hour before Carter rode into our camp."

"I haven't seen him since the inquest."

Weldon said smoothly, "Wherever he is, he is all right, Miss Lambert." A sort of relief had entered him and mellowed him. Cottonwood would not be roused this night by his pistol shots. "When I hear from him I'll let you know."

"Do that, Mr Weldon. You don't know how much it will mean to me. Maybe Tod has left the country."

Weldon thought, *That would save me the killing of him,* and he said: "Let's hope so, Miss Julia. Do you intend to stay here in Cottonwood?"

"Until I hear from Tod or Harry Carter gets him."

"I don't intend to be inquisitive," said Jib Weldon, "but Tod told me you were a school teacher."

"They have a teacher here—and if they hadn't, they'd probably not hire the sister of a wanted man. And you have to do something in a time like this—you can't just sit around and hope and wish."

Weldon said, "Tod sure went off the deep."

"You sure," asked Julia Lambert, "that you didn't help him any, Weldon?"

WELDON thought, *"Well, here it comes,"* and the hardness was in him. "Tod's a man," he said, "and able to take care of himself. There's no warrant out for me and there is for him. You've heard a lot of talk in the few days you've been in this country and you'll hear a lot more. You have to discount some and judge the other as you see fit, Miss Julia."

"Tod did your dirty work," said Julia.

Weldon asked, "Can you prove that?" He spread his thin, bony hands. "No, Miss Julia, there's lots of talk, but talk is just talk. If you stay in this town you'll be hurt. Why don't you go home and try to forget it?"

"Do you think I could?" Julia Lambert's voice held an edge of cynicism. "Is your memory something you can shut off and turn on when you want to? No, I'm here to the end—my end, or Tod's. And sometimes I hope it shall be mine first."

Weldon said almost sternly, "Don't talk that way." He had little use for words; action was the deciding factor. Time had run against him and Tod Lambert was still loose and each moment was therefore freighted with danger. He said, "Good night," and went into the dark.

Now he came to the alley's end and into the light. Now a man came out from between two buildings to his left, and Weldon felt his blood move; then he recognized the man, and his voice was touched with anger.

"Someday you'll come behind a man and he'll kill you, Harry Carter."

Carter halted and spread his legs wide. He was bulky in the darkness and Jib Weldon saw the stolidity of him. "I'm lookin' for Tod Lambert and I thought you might know where he is so I trailed you. I could have saved you the trouble of visitin' with Julia Lambert had you come to me before goin' there."

Weldon smiled and said, "Maybe it wasn't no trouble, Carter. Julia Lambert's a beautiful woman."

"And a good woman," said Carter.

Weldon moved closer and asked softly, "Are you warning me, Carter?"

"No," said Carter, "I'm not. I was just stating a fact."

"Keep your advice to yourself," stated Weldon gruffly. He went to his horse, his boot found the stirrup, and he went up. He glanced back once when at the street's end and he saw Carter standing there, dark against the shifting shadows. He said to himself, *I thought I'd have to kill you, Carter, but now I know I'll have to. . .* He moved his spurs back and the gray loped across the wild grass.

The trip, though, had its accomplishments; it had not been a total

waste of time and energy. Neither Harry Carter nor Julia Lambert knew where Tod was, and neither had seen him. This meant that Tod Lambert had not talked and the secrets were safe. Weldon leaned back and looked at the stars.

They were bright and gay—they were a golden ribbon, wide and heavy, across the sky. But he took his eyes from them: they were not part of his thoughts, they were too bright.

He thought, *If I'd been home when that man warned Tod Lambert that Carter was coming, Lambert would never have ridden into the hills. I'd have killed him and turned his body over to Carter and had my hands swear that Lambert had pulled against me and I had killed him in self defense.*

The hour was late when he reached the C Bar. The ranch-house and the buildings were dark. There was a guard at the corrals and Weldon drew in and asked, "Seen Tod Lambert around here?"

"No, Jib."

Weldon turned his horse. "If he comes in, send a man over to the Circle Y. I'm staying there tonight. Don't let him know I'm lookin' for him."

THERE was a light in the Circle Y house, and Weldon left his bronc in the barn. He stood for a moment in the shadows, his eyes on the house. There was no horse tied to the tie-rail and he knew Lambert was not there, either. He went into the house and as he entered, Ike looked up from his cards.

"Any luck, Jib?" asked the fat man.

Weldon said, "No," and sat down. He watched the man's fingers manipulate the cards, and wondered how such stubby fingers could hold such dexterity. "Solitaire, Ike?"

Ike nodded. "Want to play a little stud?"

Weldon shook his head. Time was heavy to him, and the edge of it was sharp. This ran against him and he mentally tested it. There was danger to him moving out there in the night, and that danger was personified by Tod Lambert. He dozed with his head on his chest, his body deep in the rawhide bottom chair. Ike's purr brought him hurriedly awake.

"Somebody comin', Jib."

Weldon listened and heard nothing and was silent. He was about to say something when the sound came. It was a rustle against the wall, the sound of movement under the window. Weldon sat there and listened and his blood ran huriedly. The sound moved toward the door and it opened and Tod Lambert entered. He had a gun in his hand.

"Anybody else but us three here?" he asked.

Weldon relaxed. "Just us, Tod."

Tod Lambert sheathed the gun and went to the box behind the stove. "I'm hungry as hell," he said. "Carter's a wolf, I tell you. He gets his nose to the ground and he's hard to lose."

"You lost him," said Weldon. "I saw him down in Cottonwood this evenin'."

Tod Lambert looked at him hurriedly. "He didn't follow you out, did he?"

"I got eyes," said Weldon, surlily.

Lambert was coughing silently then, almost bent double. When he straightened he had blood in his palm. He looked at it, wiped his hands on his pants, and took a sack that lay on the cordwood. He pulled bread and smoked meat from the box and started putting it in a sack. He crammed a piece of bread in his mouth.

"What'd you do with your horse?" asked Weldon.

"He's in the gully behind the house."

"Played out?"

"No, we been in the high country. Up there a man can see a lot of country to look down on." He had cleaned out the grub-box now, and he tied the sack shut with twine. "I'm pullin' out, Jib."

"Where to?"

"Back into the high country. I'll see you now and then. I may go down into Wyomin' for a spell until this cools off."

Weldon glanced at Ike, and the man nodded slightly.

Tod Lambert said, "I'll need some dough, Weldon."

Weldon took the bills from his pocket and tossed them to Lambert. The roll was fat and Lambert grabbed it. "I knew you'd come through, Jib."

Jib Weldon said, "I'd do anything for a friend, Tod. When you need any more, let me know. Keep your mouth closed and when this blows over you'll come into your own. Always remember that."

Tod Lambert said, "Thanks Jib," and moved toward the door, carrying the sack. Ike got to his feet and came forward and Lambert went out the door first. He paused against the outer door casing, his eyes on the moonlit clearing. Then he said, "So long, men," and he was running for the brush.

Jib Weldon looked at Ike and said, "Okay, fellow."

THE obese man's gun was out and the redness was running across the night. The bullet hit Tod Lambert somewhere in the back and knocked him forward and that made the second bullet miss. The third came in, doggedly and deadly, and knocked Lambert down.

He rolled over, screaming as he rolled, and the sack broke open, scattering cans and loaves across the grass. The brush was thick here, and the fourth bullet howled overhead, and became lost.

Jib Weldon was shooting now, too, but he was shooting by guesswork, not by sight. He said, "Damn you, you started shootin' too late!" and he was running forward. Above the sound of his boots he heard something roll off into space and then he heard something hit the base of the gully below. Weldon halted.

"He fell off the cliff," he said.

Ike came up and said, "I hit him twice, I know." He moved to the edge of the cliff and looked down. "There's his horse." He got the horse and led him up and by that time Weldon had gathered the spilled grub. Weldon looked at him and asked, "Well?"

"He's dead," said Ike.

"You sure?"

"The bullets hit solidly an' he screamed loud. That meant he was hurt bad, but his weight carried him ahead." He paused and listened but there was no noise in the blackness below. He shook his head and repeated, "He's dead."

"We'd never find him in that brush," said Weldon. He was dark and thoughtful; the thing had failed, and maybe yet it hadn't. "If he has got a little life in him he'll never get out of there without a horse. No use lookin' for him, either, in that brush. Poor fool, he thought that was real jake I handed him."

"A five buck bill wrapped around nothin'," murmured Ike.

CHAPTER X

THEY pulled the wagon out that morning, heading for the higher reaches. Dawn was coming across the ranges, and the dew was heavy on the dried grass. There was the rustle and stir of men and gear, the stomp and squeal of a bronc, the shadows moving to and fro in the uncertain light.

Then, gradually, as the sun came over the edge of the world, these shadows became real and significant, and the entire panorama took shape and substance. The saddlehorses were pounding around the corral, their breaths hanging white against the dawn, their hoofs hard on the ground. Loops of hardtwisted hemp, sure and deadly, would snake out their lengths, catching their victims by the neck. And the horses, broke to the rope, would slide a-halt and, as the cowpunchers drew the ropes in, the horses followed obediently.

Saddleblankets were put in place, their wrinkles smoothed out. Despite the fact that this was Montana, thousands of miles from the Mexican border, most of these saddleblankets were made originally by the Navajo and Chimayo Indians of New Mexico, and some were even woven on crude looms in Old Mexico. They were heavy and made of virgin wool. They could soak up sweat and grime and still hold their softness, and seldom

gall a bronc's back. Where a common cotton blanket would wear a saddle-sore, these wool blankets would leave the hide cool and clean.

Saddles were swung rudely up or gently lowered on the horses' backs, depending upon the cowboy's humor and the tameness of the horse. Latigo straps were threaded through cinch rings and the cinches pulled tight. Most of the cowpunchers rode a double-rigged saddle but now and then you'd run across a man that swore by the center-fire or three-quarter rig saddle. Most of the latter were southern punchers who had either followed the trailherds north through their own volition or had hastily headed north ahead of a posse.

Drummond had pulled three hands off the hay crews, giving them a strength of seven riders. One of these, a wizened oldster named Froggy, was the cook who, when he had time, would also hold the herd. A youngster, Gumbo by nickname, was the horse jingler.

Gumbo's job was to keep track of the saddlehorses during the daytime. Also, he had to help the cook make and break camp, hunt buffalo chips and wood for the cook's dutch ovens, and build the rope corrals wherein the saddlehorses were herded and held when the punchers changed broncs at noon or, in the evening, roped and staked out their night horses.

They were traveling in a country where the terrain was very rough, and it would be hard on horseflesh. Actually, there were only four active riders. Gumbo could ride no circles; he had his saddlehorses to tend to, that took all his time. Froggy, the cook, had plenty to do without riding a circle and, if they had asked him, he would have told them to go to hell and stay there—he was a chow-wrangler, no bronc-peeler. Another young man, Cliff, was the nighthawk.

Cliff's duty was to herd the saddlehorses at night. It was a thankless job; a hard job. When a night is as black as the inside of a black velour Stetson, you have a hell of a time hanging onto a herd of horses, especially if you have a bunch-quitter or two in the herd. The only thing you can do is put them to grazing in a creek bottom or gully and then ride the ridges, telling which direction they are going by the sound of their grazing and movements. Cliff liked to brag that he had never lost a horse.

Cliff slept during the day, and, when they broke camp, he drove the bed wagon while Froggy wheeled the horses on the mess wagon. Cliff also helped to establish camp and, when the camp was made, he would hit his soogans, catching a much-needed bit of shut-eye.

Drummond was wagon-boss, but he knew he would have to leave most of that duty to the negro, Latigo Jones. He did not know this country and Latigo did. He and Latigo drew up a plan of procedure.

They would start as far north as there would be cattle, and Latigo Jones figured South creek would be the outermost boundary. The creek was called South creek because it originated just south of the Canadian border, running almost due south into the Porcupine, a tributary of the Milk river.

Using South creek as a starting point, they would work the drive to the south, moving day by day closer to the home ranch. Because of their short-handedness, they would try to keep camp two or three days at the same location, thereby saving the entailed labor that would be required in breaking camp each day.

Latigo Jones was to drive the bed-wagon, and the mess wagon, with Froggy handling the lines on the four-horse team following him. Latigo knew the country and would lead them directly to the South creek camp.

WEB Drummond was riding in the bed wagon, seated on a bed roll, his crutches beside him on the wagon bed. He was chewing tobacco and cursing in a low monotone, taking in the weather, the conditions, the status of his bank, and his general cussedness. But the old hellion was grinning like a happy cat all the time. He looked at Drummond and

called out, "Well, cowboy, let's get the wheels rollin' north toward pay dirt."

Drummond pushed back his Stetson. "Sure thing, Web," he grinned. "Right smart now we'll hit the dust. Hey, Smoky, got the grub all loaded?"

"The last sack of flour, Len."

Gumbo rode up, his freckled face wrinkled. "I done got my rope-corral in ol' Froggy's wagon, Len, 'stead of the bed wagon. Just wait when he starts unwrappin' his groceries an' chuck an' lissen to him cuss." The youth spat tobacco juice and wiped his forehead. "Sure is gettin' hot in a hurry."

Latigo Jones spat and said, "This un'll be a hot drive, younker. The toughest part of the summer's ahead of us an' them dogies'll be hell an' gone wild. You'll have saddle callouses after you come in off'n this stampede."

"Suits me, Latigo."

Drummond wheeled his iron-grey gelding and rode over to the mess wagon. Froggy's delapidated Stetson sat back on his bald head and his boot rested on the foot brake. His off-leader horse was acting up, kicking and snorting.

"That danged cayuse intends to cut me up some trouble," grumbled the cook. "But a few miles of this heat an' the drag on them hills will fit his neck to that collar. You all set to let this shindig hit the gravel, Len."

"Okay," said Drummond, and lifted his hand.

Latigo Jones saw the signal and said, "Yip, yip!" and his whip snapped over the backs of his team. Heavy shoulders hit the collars hard and the bed wagon snapped forward, making Web slip off the bed-roll. Dust rose under milling hoofs and wheels and the bed wagon strung out for the hills.

The team hit a hard lope, the heavy wagon lurching behind it. Latigo reared back in his seat, his whip talking and a howl in his throat. The team raced across the level land, rocking through the open gate and streaking toward the northern hills, with Web hanging onto the bed roll and grinning.

Behind it, a pace or two, came the mess wagon, the four horses stretched out. Once a front wheel hit a prairie dog hole, causing the wagon to lurch, and Froggy hung onto his seat, letting his reins slack.

"Ride 'em cowboy," he whooped.

"Hook 'em, cow!" yelled the horse wrangler.

The horse jingler followed with his remuda, driving the drags with his trailing lariat. The rest of the crew rode on either side of him, driving the saddlehorses hard. Drummond rode the rear, heavy in the gathering dust. When he came to the bunkhouse he pulled in, and spoke to the old man standing there.

"Keep good watch over things, Charley," he said. "I've left orders with the Cabin crick hay-crew to send over two men each night to keep their eyes open. Keep your hands close to your artillery and if anything goes haywire, get word to me out on roundup."

"Sure will, Len."

Drummond leaned against his spurs, sending the iron-gray forward. Already the wagons were entering the hills, moving up a low coulee that pulled up to the higher mesas. The slow wind, moving leisurely in, sent their dust trailing across the valley until it hung lifelessly and died among the boxelders and cottonwoods bordering the Milk river.

The gray was fresh and young; he pulled against the bit. He had a habit of rolling the cricket in the bit with his tongue, and he did that now. But Drummond held him strongly, neck-reining him toward the west, swinging him in a semi-circle away from the two wagons and the crew.

THEY crossed the bottom-land and reached the hills. The gray was sweating, now; the rim of lather was thickening around the edge of the saddleblanket, and his bit was frothy. But he was not tired, the long muscles were just getting flexed. Drummond pushed back his hat and glanced up to mark the rise of the sun. The hour was still early, yet the heat was gathering. And, from pros-

pects, the heat would be intense about noon.

Drummond gave this brief thought, and disliked the heat. For, with such heat, cattle would rapidly lose weight when held or herded, and he wanted to get the steers out with as much weight as possible. Also, some of the smaller waterholes might be dry, and that could complicate things very much, making them move camp and cattle longer distances.

There was water in the Dutchman Springs. Not much, not enough to flow, but still there was plenty of water, and the springs were furnishing more. But Drummond knew that when he got farther north there would be less water. The country there was rougher with a faster runoff during rains and the melting of snow, and therefore less water had been stored up by nature.

Cattle were coming down out of the hills, drifting toward the waterholes. They intended to bed down in the trees and the brush and stay there during the terrible heat of the afternoon, and when evening came they would graze back on the higher slopes again. Drummond circled around the beasts. They stood stolidly and watched him; their eyes were impassive. A few of them, wilder than the rest, ran through the brush. Most of these were two-year-old heifers with their first calves. Spring roundup had passed and they had seen their calves branded, earmarked, vaccinated and castrated. Therefore they were leery of a man on horseback. They still remembered the agonized bawls of their offspring as the hot branding irons burned through their sleek hide.

Drummond put the gray on the ridges, riding the rimrock route. From this high vantage point he could see the landscape running away beneath him. Hills folded and lifted, became plateaus and mesas—there was a weird wildness about this land, and its air was clean air.

As he rode farther north the terrain became rougher. The shallow coulees marked by wild rosebushes and boxelder trees became ravines that were jagged with spiny bullberry bushes, with buckbrush, with boulders and rocks. The sparse grass, browned by the sun, grew around sandstone rocks.

Now and then he would see a cottontail rabbit dart into his home between the sandstones. Many times he saw a hawk or an eagle circling overhead. Their shadows swept across the ground as a grim moving omen to any wild life below that death was above moving on silent wings.

The roundup crew was to his right, moving across the hills. The teams had slowed down to a walk and Gumbo had the remuda off to one side, taking it easy and letting his saddlehorses gaze. The punchers rode ahead of the wagon and Drummond saw that Latigo was on a horse now. The giant negro was acting as wagonpilot, leading the wagons on the best paths through the hills.

They intended to camp that night on Buggy creek and reach South creek by noon the next day. They would then fan out the circle riders and the cattle would start coming in. And, from the looks of things, there weren't so many cattle in this section. But there should be enough to fill the quota demanded to meet the bank expenditures.

BY noon Drummond was still on the ridges. The wagons drew to a halt around an alkali spring three miles below. He found a trickle of water that ran out of the sandstones and soaked into the dry earth within a few feet. He had some jerky beef in his saddlebag and with it was some biscuits. He took these and ate them after tasting the water. It had a touch of alkali and it was brackish against his tongue, but he had drunk water that tasted much more bitter.

His gray munching the grass around the spring, Drummond sat with his back against a sandstone in the shade, and ate his meager rations. There was a strange contentment in him and he searched for its source. The reason was simple and elemental: he had a stout horse and there was open land and cattle ranged these hills. He stood on the edge of a land almost untouched by man's hands and that land looked good.

He closed his eyes and leaned back, letting himself relax. Things had moved fast in these last few days and he had felt the imprint of their movement and had been a part of that movement. There was the ever-present imprint of danger; it lay about him, and it touched him heavily. There was resentment in him against it because he had seen too much danger in his life and, mingled with that feeling, there was still a touch of challenge and the spice was strong on his tongue.

Somewhere Tod Lambert is in these hills, he thought, and he's a wanted man. Or maybe they have run him down by now and either killed him or have him in jail. And because he thought of Tod Lambert he thought also of Julia Lambert.

The memory of her was clear in him, and it had no false lines. She was dark and there was darkness in her and, in this, there was a challenge. There was a depth there and some day a man would meet it and he wondered who that man would be. His thoughts were not pleasant, then, and he wondered why. He had met women in his life and some had meant much, some a little, and others nothing. Why, then, this errant thought, this fleeting problem?

This was not clear to him; it lacked limited boundaries. He lifted his thoughts from Julia Lambert and across that inner screen, light and smooth, came the figure of Elaine Jordan. There was a challenge in her gray eyes—she was smooth and beautiful; she was brittle and strong, she was fire and water. There was to her a great depth, too; it lay in her glance, the saucy toss of her head, in her eyes. But it was too mature, and it was not young. This had lost its freshness in its contact with men and the ways of men.

He thought, well, it's a big world and there's lots of hills. . . He got to his horse and stepped up and rode into the heat. The roundup wagons were moving; far across the hills he saw their white canvas tops; they were ants toiling under the impotent sun. They wheeled across his sight and then they were gone as a hill rose behind them and blocked them.

The gray was tiring now, but his muscles were still limber. He did not pull on the bit; he rode with his neck out long, and his feet were slower on the narrow trails. Drummond rode the mesas and high country, avoiding the gulleys. He always had his eyes open for cattle, and these cattle were wild.

They had been roped by men and mistreated, and they never forgot this. These memories lent strength to their legs. They saw him and snorted and wheeled, their heads laid straight, their horns parting the brush. They ran like a deer runs—jumping over the low obstructions, their heads laid out in a line.

Drummond put the hooks to the gray, sending him after a five-year-old steer. The gray rose to the challenge and hit the Trail. The steer ripped through the brush, heading down the dully.

Catclaw tore at Drummond's boots, slapped off his chaps. They broke through a clump of rosebushes and a small clearing lay ahead. The gray took the opportunity and stepped up to the steer. The broad back was beside Drummond then and it was wide and fat with a growth of long silky hair. The steer was one of the best and he would bring a good weight on the scales. Drummond pulled in the gray and watched the steer run down the gulley.

The gray was breathing heavily, the saddle moving to his breaths. The steer ran downslope, heading for a canyon below. Drummond leaned against his cantle and thought: That's the way to do it, gray hoss. Head them down toward the low country and give them a good start. When they hit the bottom lands they'll be played out some and tired and then we can pick them up. Work the ridges and haze them down toward the wagons. . . He looked at the sun.

The time was about four, and the wagons were quite a distance away—in fact, they were out of sight. He turned the gray toward the east and rode slowly, letting the weary animal pick his way. When he rode down on

Buggy creek the wagons had drawn up beside a spring under an overthrust and the jingler had already built his rope corral. The saddle-horses and wagon broncs were grazing in the green grass bordering the pot-holes of water and the punchers were sitting in the shade, their backs to the hill. They looked up and nodded as he rode in but they did not speak. The heat had been terrific and it had drained them dry and there was really nothing to talk about at that. . .

CHAPTER XI

WHEN Tod Lambert regained consciousness the night had almost passed and the chill of early dawn was on the thin air. The world about him was gray; the brush stood out against gray, and the sky was leaden. He thought, at first, that his eyes had caused this apparition, then he saw that dawn was coming.

He lay on his side. He had slid forward, pushed by his long fall, and he had moved back under an overhang of rock. He let his eyes close and his thoughts went back. The memories came slowly to group themselves into a composite picture, and when that picture became clear there was bitterness in him.

But this was of short life; he had no place for it now. The fall down the canyon had been long and his clothes were torn. A band of pain ran around his chest, holding in his breath with a hoop of steel.

He was giddy and weak but he got his hands under him and tried to sit up. The effort was costly and it left him white and shaken. He leaned back against the rock and closed his eyes. When he opened them again the dawn was there. It was pushing back the night and he knew he would have to work fast.

One thought ran predominant in his mind, and that was concerned with Jib Weldon. Weldon had double-crossed him and tried to kill him and only by miraculous luck had Weldon failed. Now Weldon did not know for sure if he was dead and perhaps when light came Weldon and Ike would come and look for him.

He gathered his strength and got to his feet. The effort left his knees weak, and the pain across his heart was heavier. He knew there was no use going back to where he had left his horse; Weldon would have the animal by now, and he was on foot. His holster was empty. He had lost his gun in the fall down the cliff. And he would never find it, even if he did take time to look. And he did not intend to do that.

There was a crust of dried blood across his back, and he hoped this would not break open and let the wound bleed again. The brush was high here—higher than a man—but the deer had made dim trails through it, and he followed these as hurriedly as he could.

The rosebushes were spiny arms barring his passage. They clung to his torn clothes and slashed against his face. He followed the trail down the canyon, moving at a slow uncertain gait. He had to rest four times—each time his strength left him and he crawled into the brush, wondering if he would ever get to his feet again.

But there was a doggedness, a stubbornness, in him and he called upon this, and it gave him aid. The thing had played against him from the start and this was close to the end and soon everything would be over. He had drawn his hand but Weldon had held the best hand and Weldon was raking in the pot he had built up. This thought rankled him and in it he found a pit of anger.

This anger was not hot; it was cold, and in its coldness lay its strength. He had but one objective now, and that was Harry Carter. Carter was the bulldog, the trailsman, and Carter would get Weldon. But Carter was in Cottonwood, and Cottonwood was miles away.

The water was cool against his face, and he realized he was kneeling in the small stream. Water was flowing over his legs and into his boots; it was cool, it was sweet, there was strength in it. Again he doused his face and again the water ran from his jaw and down his neck. He

thought of taking off his shirt and washing his wounds, but he knew that if he broke the clotted blood more fresh blood would come, and he needed his blood.

He drank deeply and then remembered that he was hungry. He remembered when he had eaten last, there in the cabin when he had bolted down the food. But the heat of day would soon be on him, and he would have to keep moving ahead.

He knew that he could never reach Cottonwood on foot, the distance was too far. He needed a horse and he needed a gun, for by this time Weldon had the word out and if a C Bar man saw him he would be dead. He took these thoughts fast into him, and found his solution.

TWO hours later, he halted in the brush, and looked at the cabin ahead.

He judged, from the sun's position, that it was around five-thirty. A slow plume of smoke, looking sleepy and stupid against the sunrise, was coming from the stove-pipe chimney. The cabin was made of cottonwood logs. It was shabby and tarnished with time, and the mud chinking had fallen out. It lay along the base of the cabin. The place showed lack of attention.

The barn was small. The sides were made of upright willows, woven in and out of barbwire, and the top was matted grass and straw. Beyond it lay a woven wire corral braced by upright cottonwoods and in this corral were about five hundred head of sheep.

Two mongrels were sleeping beside the cabin's door. They did not see him when he went into the barn and the wind was against them so they did not get his scent. The barn's interior was still dark and he leaned against the inside wall, holding a cough back in his throat, and waited for his eyes to pick out objects.

Finally he saw the two horses munching hay at the manger. They were skinny beasts, and they regarded him without interest. He thought: Well, here is a horse for me, but where is a gun? He sent a glance around the barn—sometimes a man would hang his rifle close to his saddle—but there was no rifle hanging from any of the pegs driven into the uprights.

A saddle hung by a stirrup against the wall and he went to it. There was a rifle-scabbard laced to its fork and back saddlestrings, but there was no rifle in it. He went back to the door and looked at the house. The coughing came again and he held it, and then he went toward the house.

The dogs saw him and started barking. They got to their feet, the hair stiff on their necks. From inside the house a man's voice said sternly, "Pete, Jack, quit that!" But the dogs kept on barking.

The man came to the door, then. He was a halfbreed and he was tall, but age and hard work had bent him. He saw Tod Lambert and said hurriedly, speaking brokenly: "What's the matter, Tod?"

"Bullets, Hank."

The 'breed said, "So you broke up with Weldon, huh?"

Tod sat down. He held his head between his hands. Giddiness was running rampant through him and he fought it and won. "They shot me but I got away. I need a horse, Hank. I gotta get to Carter."

The 'breed knelt beside him and gingerly took off his shirt. What he saw made him grunt softly. "That bullet's through your lung," he said. "The other broke your ribs."

"You can hold so much pain," said Tod Lambert, "and then you can't hold any more, and you don't notice the pain you have as bad."

"Sit there," said Hank. He poured the black coffee into a heavy mug and Tod drank it slowly. There was strength in it and the rough bread and he felt lassitude coming in. The pain went down and the sleepiness came in and he said, "Help me to your bed, Hank. . ."

The 'breed helped him and said, "Weldon'll be lookin' for you, Tod."

"I don't think so," said Tod Lambert. "He prob'ly figures I'm dead at the bottom of the canyon in that thick brush. But you better watch

out for your hide. If Weldon finds out you helped me. . ."

The halfbreed said, simply, "I'm leavin', Tod. I'm movin' my sheep across the range. Weldon'll never tie me to this because if he does, he'll kill me. I have to pull out on you."

Tod Lambert understood, and he nodded. "Leave me a horse, that's all." He turned to the wall and went to sleep. He woke up once, ten hours later; he was alone, but he did not know it, for he cursed in delirium, but sleep took him again. When he awoke the second time it was dark and his body was on fire. He knew he was all in, that his chips were running low, and he knew he would have to get to Carter. He lay there and waited, and dawn came at last.

He had no hunger, but a terrible thirst held him. He drank deeply at the water bucket but the water was strong with alkali and it was hot. He got to the barn and there was a horse there, saddled and tied to a manger by a halter rope. The bridle hung around the horn and he took the halter off and put the bit between the teeth. Then he noticed that the manger was empty.

He looked at this for a moment, wondering why the halfbreed had not left hay for the horse, and then he realized he had been out for a long time and that the horse had eaten the hay. He thought back, trying to keep track of time, but he could not; he wondered whether one day had passed. But the horse would not eat a manger of hay in one day; it would take him about two days, or maybe longer.

Tod led the animal to the creek, and it got to its knees and drank. He leaned against the animal's neck and thought, "Well, I've got a horse now and there's a rifle on my saddle but it's over forty miles into Cottonwood. . ."

He stepped up and rode away but he slouched over the saddlehorn.

WELDON rode first to the Round Butte haycamp and said to his hayboss, "Have the crew ready to move in case of trouble." Then he rode for the C Bar and he whistled softly and tonelessly. When he came into the C Bar, Elaine Jordan was drawing a bucket of water from the well. He sat his horse and did not offer to help her.

She said, "Where have you been?"

"At the Circle Y," he answered. He stepped down, then, and took the bucket and they went to the house, the water splashing slightly over the rim and leaving a trail of dots in the dust.

"You're through at the C Bar?"

"Yes."

She said, "Then you've gained what you needed, and you're leaving me?"

"You told me to go," he corrected.

"But you said—"

"A man can change his mind," he said.

"You used the C Bar to get a foothold in the valley," she accused. "Then, when you got that hold, you left the C Bar. Is that it?"

"That's it."

"And where does that leave me?" she asked. She did not let him answer. "I'll tell you, Weldon. It leaves me with the antipathy of my neighbors for the acts done by you and your men. It leaves me feeling cheap and small inside for ever thinking seriously of you but it also leaves me free. My hands are clean, now, and yours are the stained ones."

Weldon said, "You walked out on me, Elaine." She was a pretty woman and he was a man and he had his lonesome moments, but she did not stir him now. "But why talk of that? It's roped and quartered and hung in the cooler."

"Then why are you here?"

"Get a few personal effects." He thought of telling her of Tod Lambert's death, and he did not. She knew enough now, and she need know no more. He left her in the kitchen and went to the bunkhouse and picked up his duds. He tied the warbag behind his saddle and rode toward Cottonwood.

He gained the summit, his horse breathing hard, and the valley lay below him then, rolling and moving across space. The sun was clear and bright and there was no wind. The Drummond ranch-house was below

him, and he looked at it for a long moment. He rode away, the picture clear in his memory.

He thought: Well, Tod Lambert's dead; his voice is silent, and with him died a lot of knowledge. . . This thought was satisfying; it held coolness and liberty, and the weight was less. But it was disturbing, too, for back of it was this thought: Maybe Lambert had not died, maybe he had escaped through the brush, maybe he would live to talk. . .

No, he thought, he's dead. Ike and I searched the brush this morning but it was thick and we saw a lot of blood. He's dead down there, somewhere in that thickness, and his part is ended.

But the thought remained.

CARTER was coming from the postoffice when Weldon reached Cottonwood. Weldon lifted his hand and said, "Howdy, Carter," and the sheriff looked at him for a period of time and then said, "Have you seen young Lambert yet?"

Weldon dismounted, "No," he said. "Have you?"

Carter shook his head.

Weldon said, "Maybe he's left the country." His eyes were heavy against Carter's, but he found no give. He wondered how much Carter knew, and then he realized the man knew nothing, he had only his suspicions.

"I don't think he has," said Carter.

"Why not? He's free and loose and he's prob'ly got a young fortune. He's young and the trail has no end."

"You forgot one thing," said Carter.

"Yes? And that?"

"His sister."

Weldon said, "There's little bond between them."

Carter nodded and went on. "There's another thing that would hold him, too. And that's you."

"Me?"

"He rode with you; he was your friend."

Weldon said, "Well, I haven't seen him. Do you think I have, Carter?"

"I'll reserve my judgment," said Carter.

Weldon felt anger stir him; it was deep, and it had been long developing. This man was not arrogant, but he was strong and he was bucking him. Carter felt the edge of this anger, and its sharpness pleased him slightly, and he was little given to pleasure. There would come the time and the place and he would dull that edge.

"Do that," murmured Weldon.

Weldon went down the street and entered a saloon but he did not stop there, he went out the back door and down the alley and knocked on Julia Lambert's door. There was no answer so he entered and went through the room into her store. She had not heard his knock and she was sewing beside the window.

"What do you want, Mr. Weldon?"

He said, almost roughly: "I want to talk to you."

"My customers come in the front door," she reminded him angrily. "They don't come through my living quarters unasked."

He said, "I go where I want to. I make my own way." He looked at the dress she was sewing. "Elaine Jordan's dress, huh?"

"Yes."

"A pretty dress for a beautiful woman," he said.

She said, "You never came to talk about Elaine's beauty."

He smiled and said, softly, "I'm sorry I came in as I did, but I didn't want the town to see me enter by the front. Have you seen Tod?"

She looked at him and asked, "No, have you?"

He shook his head. "I think," he said quietly, "that Tod has left the country. I hope so, for his sake, and for yours."

"You can leave me out of your thinking."

He said, "You have a sharp tongue." She was sewing again and she was quiet; there was a darkness in her, and this held mystery. He said to himself: Watch yourself, Jib Weldon, there's too much at stake, and then he said aloud, "If he comes, let me know. Keep it from Harry Carter or he'll go to jail. We'll talk him into leaving the country."

She did not answer and he left. He had put up his little act and it had gone over and now only he and Ike knew how Tod Lambert had died. He thought of Ike; this fat man knew much, but he held those thoughts for Ike was in deep, so deep he would hold his tongue.

Time was heavy on his hands, so he stood in a saloon, one boot propped on the railing, looking out the front window. Carter came along the street and then rode out of sight, heading for the range. He rolled this in his mind, and found no danger in it.

BUT there was no sign of Tod Lambert and he told himself he was carrying this too far, that Lambert was dead and limp in the canyon. He turned his thoughts to what was ahead, and he saw each step in this program, and each of those steps were violent.

The sun had heeled over when he rode out. He had three men at the Smoke pine linecamp and he picked these up and rode to the Circle Y. Ike was alone there and he had a rifle in his hands when they rode into the clearing.

"Your nerves are jumpy," he said, smiling.

"Carter was here this afternoon."

Weldon looked at him, sharply. "Who was he lookin' for?"

"Tod Lambert, of course. You know, Jib, I don't like that man; he's too much on the move. I'll be waitin' for that day."

"Maybe that day," murmured Weldon, "will come sooner than you think, Ike."

Ike nodded. "Let's hope so, Jib." He looked at the three other riders. "Somethin' in the wind this fine evenin'?"

"Saddle your horse," ordered Weldon.

Ike went to the corral and Weldon and his men entered the house. They got extra cartridges for their rifles and sixshooters. They broke the boxes and stuffed the bullets into their pockets or belt-loops.

"We better get some grub," said a rider.

Weldon said, "We've got lots of time, no use ridin' on an empty belly." He leaned back in his chair.

Ike stirred up a mess of grub. The fat man moved slowly but his slowness brought results. The bacon was fried just right, the eggs were sunny-side up, and the beans and ham had a fine aroma. Weldon looked at one of his men and said, "Damn, if he was only a woman, I'd marry him for his cookin'."

They ate in silence and Ike left the dirty dishes heaped in the pan. They mounted and turned their horses after Jib Weldon, who took the trail at a long lope. The dusk changed into darkness and then the moon came up. The obese man moved his horse close to Weldon's.

"Where to, Jib?"

"The Drummonds are out on roundup," said Weldon. "I don't figure there'll be many hands at the home-ranch because most of them are out on haycrew."

Ike leaned back in his saddle and nodded. "I see," he murmured.

CHAPTER XII

THIS was a rough country, and the heat and terrain were killing to horses and riders alike. They reached South creek and the wagons stopped. The circle men swung out, working the country along the Canadian line, and the cattle started coming in. The herd grew slowly, though.

The first night found a sizeable herd gathered, and they had just worked one afternoon. Drummond came in, tall and dusty from his saddle, and rode up to the mess wagon, where the cook had a pail of fresh water. He leaned on a stirrup and took the dipper and drank deep.

"Damn it to hell," said the cook, "why don't you drink outa the creek? I had to pack that water up here, that damned hoss jingler was too lazy."

Drummond smiled and said, "Where's Web?"

"Out there." The cook gestured to the riders holding the herd, about a quarter-mile down the creek.

Drummond rode, frowning. Web

Drummond was riding a buckskin, his crutches tied to his saddle. Drummond pulled up and said, "Well, I'll be damned. Since when have you got old enough to sit a horse all by yourself?"

"Since noon," said Web.

"Ride light," murmured Drummond. Latigo Jones rode up, his teeth wide. "Head over to the wagon, Latigo, and get some chuck. Take the boys with you. Me an' Web'll pow-wow these cattle around."

"They ain't so wild, now," said Latigo. "That heat an' their runnin' took the edge off'n 'em. Them cows are the closest things to antelopes I've ever seen."

"We'll cut the herd when you get back," said Drummond.

The cutting did not take long, and the results were not satisfying. Cows and calves were turned back and the steers—from three years up—were kept away from the cattle to the south that were still to be rounded-up.

Drummond leaned forward in saddle and said, "How many head, Web?"

"Not many," said Web.

"Maybe we'll have to take some two-year-old steers," said Drummond. "Otherwise, we might not get enough. We'll see how things run down to the south. Better ride for the wagon, Web. Latigo an' me'll take first trick an' then two of the other boys can spell us off. Guess we'll have to ride four-hour shifts."

"I'll take a turn," said Web. He rode off and Latigo murmured, "Better not let him ride night guard, Drummond. He's talkin' strong but he ain't got much reserve."

"We'll talk him out of it," said Drummond.

The steers were restless, wanting to drift back to their home range with the cows and young stuff, but they held them tight. Now and then a bunch-quitter would dart out, heading for freedom, but a quick saddle-horse would head him, hazing him back into the herd.

By noon the next day, they had worked the South creek country and taken its offerings. They had a little over a hundred head of steers. Not many, but they were good beef, and they had weight. They also had plenty of speed, too, as Latigo Jones was willing to testify. Latigo's horse had stumbled with a loose shoe and both the animal and the negro had taken a bad fall.

They went out on circle and the wagon moved south, going toward a wide stretch of valley land some fifteen miles away. The country was not quite so rough, but the heat was unbearable for man and beast. Shimmering and wavering, it lay across the hills, holding the smoldering land in its grip.

Although the heat helped them by taking some of the wildness out of the cattle, it hindered them by slowing down their horses. Also, this was the country of bitter water, and that made it hard for both man and horse. There were no cool springs. The water was that accumulated and stored up by the spring thaws and it tasted of alkali and gypsum. A man's belly revolted against it and he lost his appetite.

They had quite a herd gathered that night, but they did not put it with the old herd. They held the first herd apart until the second herd was cut and its cows and calves turned back on the range. Then the new steers were turned in with the old ones, who had quieted down somewhat by this time.

BUT trouble was staring them in the face. They had not had shoes for all of their saddlestock and now some of the barefooted horses were beginning to become tender. Drummond sent the word around to ride the shod horses the most, but that was of little use—the shod horses were few, and they were playing out. Latigo Jones summed up the thing in a few words.

"Gotta get some hoss shoes, Len."

Drummond nodded and rode out on night guard. The heat had died, by now, and clouds were in the sky; the air was getting chilly, and Drummond had his eyes on the clouds. The dawn was creeping in but it wasn't

as light as it should be at this time of the morning. His night-guard partner came riding toward him.

"Looks like rain, Len."

Drummond said, "I suppose that is next," and irritation rubbed him strongly. The thing was going to hell: the heat had robbed man and horse, the cattle had been too wild, and there had not been enough of them. But the first few drops were coming as he rode into camp.

"Hell's on fire," mumbled Latigo.

"She's here," said Web. "When the sky gets this way in Montana the clouds are ready to break. Be nice for the feed. Grass sure was getting short and dry."

"Yeah," said Latigo, "but how about us?"

"Our big problem," said Web Drummond, "is to get hold of some horse-shoes." He looked at Len Drummond. "You figure they got some in down town by yet, Len?"

"Should have. I guess I oughta mosey down that direction this afternoon and take a pack-horse along."

"Do that," said Web.

The rain kept coming stronger. It was no cloudburst; if it had been, it would have soon passed over. It started slowly with big drops, and then turned into a steady rain. It would slacken for a few minutes and then resume its steadiness again.

Slickers were of little use. The brush was wet and it slapped back against a man, and splattered him with water. Gumbo turned into slippery soap, dangerous for horses, especially if those horses were traveling fast.

The advantages were with the cattle, now. Their split, sharp hoofs were sure on this ground, and they knew the trails. An unshod horse was not much count here; he was dangerous to himself, dangerous to his rider. He'd slip on the gumbo and alkali and slide, and it was hard telling just how the man on him would come through.

There was one thing in favor of the crew, and that was the greater number of cattle. Here the wild cows had come down from the hills, for the grass was greener in the draws; but with the arrival of rain, they would drift back again to the higher reaches. That meant that the roundup crew would have to gather them before they drifted too far.

They moved the wagons to the higher ground, but here it was still wet. The cook strunk a tarp from a high boulder and used it as protection. Cowpunchers squatted and drank hot coffee and cursed the elements and wild cattle. The horse-jingler spread his remuda across the hills and sat among the rocks, protected from the biting wind. The valley below him was gray with rain.

They had a larger gather that morning and because they were short-handed they had to cut at noon. The next morning three or four riders were leaving the haycrews, and were coming to help them. They rode with this thought in mind, and found some comfort in it.

Cold hands twisted a soggy cigaret. Squinted eyes pulled tight with the flare of a match against them and then the cool smoke entering a man's lungs. The movement of a horse under you and the drip-drip of water from your Stetson down on the back of your oilskin slicker. The hills moving endlessly across space and rain, and movement and time became lost.

Cattle milling in the rain. Steers standing with their rumps against the coldness, their heads low against the mud. Steers shuffling through the rain, their wide rumps wet and soggy, the thick hair laying against the tough skin. Steers bawling plaintively, steers bawling in anger. . .

The toughest to handle were the cows with calves. They wheeled through the brush, their calves running behind them. They leapt over cut-coulees, threaded their ways through the bottoms of gullies.

DRUMMOND was working the ridge country, turning the cattle into the gullies. They would wind down these and come on the holding-grounds. Here the rain was heavy, and it ran from the sandstones and boulders, cutting through the narrow trail. He rode his reins and his spurs hard, holding the sor-

rel from slipping by sheer strength. It was hard work; dangerous work.

He jumped eight head in the service-berry brush. Three steers, two heifers, a cow with twin bull calves. The cow was wild and wise, and she led the way, heading down the slope. Drummond pulled up and watched them.

Latigo Jones was working the lower hills, and he saw the herd coming. He sent his horse into a clump of buskbrush, and the cattle thundered past. When the last steer had run by, Latigo sent his horse into the open. He put the animal close to a steer, whipping the critter with his wet catchrope for more speed. He ran a short distance and then rode back, grinning to himself.

Drummond rode down and said, "Guess I'd better be heading into town, Latigo, and get those shoes."

"Reckon so," said Latigo. He looked at him for some time. "Want me to ride along with you?"

"Thanks, I can handle it."

Latigo said quietly, "Weldon is a dangerous man and he plays for keeps, Len. Don't ever forget that."

Drummond said, "I won't, Latigo," and his tone was sincere. He rode off then, moving into the gray rain, and the giant negro watched him, something showing in his eyes. Drummond was gone now, the rain had swallowed him, and Latigo Jones said, "Damn you, Jib Weldon." He sat there for a long moment, looking at the rain; then he turned his horse, and rode for more cattle.

When he rode into camp, the Drummond riders had already arrived, and Latigo looked at them. "Thought you weren't due until morning," he said.

Web Drummond said, "Jib Weldon payed a visit to the ranch last night."

Latigo spoke to one of the men. "What happened?"

"They burned most of the place," he said. "The barn, haystacks, and most of the house is gone."

"Did you see Weldon close enough to recognize him?"

The man shook his head. "Too dark and things happened too fast. But it had to be Weldon; who else could it be?"

"Him all right," agreed the negro. He looked at Web. "If we had positive proof that Weldon did it we could swear out a warrant an' Harry Carter would serve it."

"But we ain't got that proof," said Web Drummond.

"Anybody get hurt?" asked Latigo.

Nobody had been killed. A couple of the Drummond riders had scratches. None of the Weldon raiders were left behind, dead, although quite a bit of shooting had occurred. Latigo nodded bleakly.

"Len might hear about this down in Cottonwood, Web," he said, "an' he might go on the warpath alone. That'd be a dangerous thing for him to do an' Weldon would want him to do it. Reckon I oughta ride into town an' sorta look around?"

Web Drummond nodded.

DRUMMOND rode at a fast gait, pushing his horse through the mist. The packhorse led well; he followed at a long lope. They threaded their way across the rough country, and when they reached the foothills the rain had somewhat subsided. The valley lay under heavy clouds, but now and then the rain ceased. Drummond read the sky overhead and hoped for clear weather.

When he reached the river, the rain had started again. He lowered his head and rode into it; it came with a bursting squall, and then it was gone. He hit the river at Jornberg's Crossing, but the Milk was running heavy with flood waters. Usually the water was only to a bronc's belly but he knew he would have to swim across here.

He untied the packhorse and slapped him with his quirt, driving the animal into the muddy water. The brute balked and reared, but Drummond drove him harder, shoving him in with his own horse. The packhorse gave up, then, and went into the current; he swam strongly and breasted the riffles, heading for the other shore. Drummond said, "I can't get any wetter, cayuse!" and

put his spurs in the horse's neck. The beast slipped into the stream and in no time started to swim.

The horse was a good water horse, swimming like a beaver. He rode high in the water, his saddle fork and wethers high and dry; his stroke was sure, and he had swam many times—he had no fear of water.

The packhorse was already on the other shore, climbing from the water with dripping belly. He shook himself like a huge dog and started cropping the grass among the stubby willows. Drummond's horse took the riffles, the force of the flowing water swinging his rump around, but the brute swam harder and pulled out on the sandy south bank.

Drummond stepped down and, seated on a rock, he pulled off his boots, pouring the water from them. He took off his socks and wrung the water out of them and pulled on his boots.

It was seven o'clock when he reached Cottonwood. Rain was dripping from the spreading trees and the lamplight in windows stirred him and brought him a touch of envy. Behind those lights men and women and children were dry; they had no worries and they needed no guns. Their beds were dry and clean and his bed would be wet and muddy, out there at the roundup camp. He dismissed these thoughts and looked at the store. There was a light there.

He left his horses at the hitchrack and entered. The storekeeper was putting out the lights and he stared at Drummond. "Thought you were out on roundup?"

Drummond said, "Did those shoes come?"

"Yeah. Out back, in a barrel. You goin' take the whole thing?"

"We'll put them in two sacks," said Drummond.

They divided the shoes, and carried them to the packhorse. Drummond led the packhorse to the livery barn and the oldster stared at him through whiskey-blurred eyes. He said, "Where's my horse?"

Drummond said, "By heaven, I forgot him again. I suppose this calls for a quart this time, huh?"

"I could stand a quart," the old man said. He was too drunk; his knees were wobbly. He dug into the oats bin and came out with a pint. "Wanta drink, Drummond."

Drummond drank. The liquor was warm; it was satisfying. The oldster leaned back drunkenly and surveyed him. Drummond said, "Will you know me the next time, old man?"

"You'll be a tall man to get in a coffin."

Drummond smiled and said, "So that's what's botherin' you." He turned and went to his packhorse and took the load from him. The old man settled against the wall, sitting at its base; his head lopped forward on his chest, and he slept. Drummond grained his horses and fed them some bluejoint from the haymow. The storekeeper came in and said, "Better come to the house for supper, Drummond."

Drummond murmured, "Thanks a lot, fellow, I really appreciate it; but I have other plans—some other time."

The man nodded and said, "We'll let it stand at that, then." He looked at the drunken oldster. "Seem's like our friend has been conversing too freely with John Barleycorn, huh?"

"He's out for the count."

THEY went down the street together, and parted at the corner. The rain was a drizzle now and Drummond moved into it, bent against the wind. He was big and square and his slicker was yellow against the lights from windows. He went to Julia Lambert's millinery store and saw that a C Bar horse stood in front. He glanced at the saddle, and he knew it was a woman's, and he frowned. He stood like that for a moment, his knuckles raised, then he rapped on the door.

There was no answer so he rapped again, harder this time. The door in the back opened then and outlined the girl against the light. She opened the outside door and said, "Who's there?"

"Len Drummond."

She said, "Come in," and he followed her through the shop and into her living rooms. There was a woman's scent in the air: perfume, a

smell of cloth, and the steamy smell of cinnamon. The light was harsh against his eyes and he saw Elaine Jordan sitting beside the lamp with a needle. He lifted his hat and said, "I hope I'm not intruding," and noticed that Elaine Jordan was pleating a dress.

"A pretty dress," he said.

"Do you like it?" Elaine Jordan held it at arm's length. It was shimmering and bright, and she was brittle behind it. This thought registered on Drummond and brought him no warmth.

"We almost got it finished," said Julia. She looked at him for some time. "Did you bring me word of Tod?"

Drummond murmured, "No," and looked at Elaine Jordan.

She said, "I can't help it, can I? I don't know where he is, do I?"

Drummond said, quietly, "I never said you know, did I?" She went back to her sewing and Drummond said, "Web'll have that money to pay off that note when we sell the cattle we're gathering."

She said, "Let's not talk business."

Drummond said, "I'm sorry," and Julia asked him to sit down. He took the chair and the girl asked, "Have you eaten yet?"

"This afternoon."

"My, you're hungry, then."

Drummond said, "Now don't, please."

"A cup of coffee, then?"

Drummond leaned back; the room was warm, the elements were outside. "Yes, if it isn't too much bother."

"I just put some on the stove." She excused herself and went into the next room. Elaine Jordan got to her feet and folded the dress in a package. She said, "We can be friends, Drummond."

Drummond said, "I don't think so, Miss. You see, there's Jib Weldon."

She looked at him. "Weldon is out on his own; he bought the Circle Y."

"There's still Weldon."

She said, almost roughly, "But you're a man and you can fight."

"Yes," he said, "and I can fight a woman, too; especially when that woman starts the trouble. You started something big here, Miss Jordan, and now it has run away with you. Only one thing can settle it, and that is guns: and guns bring death, and you started that death."

"Then what," she asked, "would you advise?"

He said, "Sell out and leave."

She spoke quietly. "You know, I was giving up the fight, but now I believe I've changed my mind. I believe I'll keep on fighting."

"Why?"

"For a personal reason. A woman's changeable heart, we'll say. They are changeable, aren't they?"

"I guess so."

"You don't know?"

"I'm not God," said Drummond.

SHE called into the next room, "Miss Lambert, I'll have to go now," and Julia came in and went to the closet, getting her wraps. She was wearing a gray raincoat and she opened her umbrella. Julia turned suddenly and ran into the other room, "The coffee's boiling over!"

Drummond got to his feet. She stood beside him, her eyes grave. She said evenly, "I had plans once, and they went astray, Drummond. A woman's heart is weak but her flesh is strong. A man's heart and flesh are both weak. Maybe some day you'll glimpse what those plans were. But pride is a dangerous thing and sometimes you have to reach over it and bury it." She stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

Her lips were warm, fleeting; their essence moved through him, and touched him. She turned then, and went outside. He watched her walk into the night and then the rain hid her. He put his hand up and touched his lips.

He murmured, "Elaine Jordan, you little fool," and then Julia Lambert said, "Coffee is ready, Mr. Drummond."

The table was small and it had a clean linen tablecloth. A vase of wild sweetpeas and bitter-roots stood in its middle. There was a pitcher of cream and the clean white cups and the warm coffee.

Drummond said, "I had come down to ask you out for supper, Miss Lambert. But when I saw Miss Jordan here I didn't want to ask. I don't know why, but I guess it wasn't just right to ask when you had company."

"This is better," she said, "with the rain out." She poured his cream. "Tell me when you've had enough?"

"We used to play a game like that when I was a kid," he said. "That is, we used the word *enough*. I forget just what we used to do but I can remember a fellow saying, *nough, nough*. Did you ever do that?"

"Yes, I guess I did."

He said softly, "Web never swore out a warrant for your brother. The bank examiners did that. Web plays his cards square—if he could make up the loss, he'd do it."

"I wonder where he is," she said.

She got to her feet and walked to the window. She parted the blind and looked out into the rain. She stood there for some time, and Drummond thought: At thirty she'll still be more beautiful and at forty she'll still be lovely and when her hair is gray it will be like spun silver. . . And then he thought, now I've never thought that way about any other woman before. She turned and said, "I hope, wherever he is, he is out of the rain and the cold."

"You'll hear from him," said Drummond.

"Yes, but when, and how?"

"There'll be a way," assured Drummond.

She sat down and said, "I guess time will tell the answer." She held her cup up. "A toast, Drummond, to the mad god that prompts us. May he guide us because our feet and strength are weak." There was a twisted smile on her lips.

"A toast," said Drummond, "with coffee." They drank and he said, wryly, "First one I have ever drunk with coffee."

She smiled and started to chat. She was lonesome and he sensed it, and he let her talk. But under her ran always that same vein, and there was anxiety in her. She tried to hide it under forced laughter but yet it touched her words and expressions. Drummond felt it and appreciated it and thought of many things.

She had doughnuts, too; she had baked them that day. They were big things and soft, and wrapped with sugar. Drummond took one and found it good. He swung the conversation around and soon she was talking about herself.

She had been teaching school in Texas, and Tod had sent her money, too much money. Their father had died years before and a short time ago their mother had followed him, and she had worried about Tod and the money and so she had come north. There were other incidents, too; homey little things: new dresses and hats and her college years, and the girls she knew.

Drummond leaned back and listened and liked what he heard. He was tired and saddle-weary and he was wet with rain. But somehow, he felt comfortable, and he leaned back in his chair, the smoke in his lungs. He thought, soon I'll have to hit the trail again and the rain is heavy out and this will be something to think about. . . Then he said, suddenly, "What was that?"

Julia had heard it, too. "Sounded like somebody moving against the house."

They were silent then, and Drummond heard no sound; then the sound came agin, somebody was moving toward the door. The sound traveled along the wall, and Drummond saw the doorknob turn. It turned slowly and then it broke open and Tod Lambert stood in the door.

He said, grimly, "Well, I made it, sis."

CHAPTER XIII

DRUMMOND went up to him and helped him across the room. His knees were weak and Drummond almost had to hold him. Julia said, "Here, into my room," and they followed her.

They put him on the edge of the bed and Drummond said, "Help me take off his coat." They took it off as easily as possible, but that was hard because Tod Lambert did not

help much; he was too limp. Drummond lifted his legs and lay him on the bed. He said, "You better get the doctor."

"No," said Tod Lambert.

Julia stopped and said, "Why not?"

"A doctor isn't God, sis."

Julia looked at Drummond. "He isn't in town, anyway. Elaine Jordan said he had driven out to Mumford's. Their little boy is ill."

"Get Harry Carter," said Tod Lambert.

Drummond said, "I'll get him," and started for the back door. The door opened before he got to it and Harry Carter entered and said, "Who just came in here?"

"Tod," said Drummond; "in the next room."

Carter said, "I was watchin' the place," and Drummond followed him into the room. Julia was sitting on the bed beside her brother. "He's wounded," she said.

Harry Carter looked down and said, "And bad, too. Let's take off his shirt, Drummond."

Tod Lambert said, "Damn you, Carter, don't touch me. I've had these bullets in me for a long time, now, and it's too late."

"Who shot you?" said Carter.

"Ike. Him and Jib Weldon were at the Circle Y. I came outa the hills —that was, God, I don't know how long, it seems like years. They knocked me down in the brush and couldn't find me and I finally got here—I gotta tell you. . ."

"Tell me what?"

"Weldon got the money I took from the bank. I staked him and he turned against me. Him an' Ike killed that salesman. Weldon shot Drummond, too—Web Drummond. He laid behind a rock." Tod Lambert looked at Drummond, "You're a witness to my statements, fellow. So are you, sister."

"Your word," said Carter, "will stand up in court with three witnesses." He asked, "Any more?"

"What more," asked Tod Lambert, sunically, "do you need?" He closed his eyes and his chest rose to his breathing.

Julia looked at Drummond. "We have to do something."

"Get some hot water," said Drummond.

He and Carter took off the shirt, cutting it with Drummond's knife. Drummond washed the wounds, his hands careful, and bound them with strips of sheeting. When he was finished Julia looked at him.

"He'll come through," he murmured.

Julia said, "Please, Drummond. . ."

* * * *

ELAINE JORDAN saw Tod Lambert ride into town and she saw him clearly when he rode into the alley. She told herself, there's something wrong with him, and then Harry Carter moved out of the shadow of the nearby store. He said, "that was Tod Lambert, wasn't it?"

"I don't know," said Elaine.

Carter said, "Your eyes are younger than mine and you were closer." He went down the alley, then, and Elaine Jordan stood there, thinking of Tod Lambert and thinking of Drummond. Drummond's rebuff was still with her; it rankled her, and she thought of Jib Weldon. Tod Lambert would talk and in that talk Jib Weldon would read his doom.

She went to her horse. She had intended staying over, but this put a new light on things. The slicker was rough around her shoulders and rain dripped from her oilskin hat. There was rain and mud and there was her thoughts, and neither of the three was pleasant.

She had no use for Weldon, but she would need him to fight Drummond, and she knew she would fight now; Drummond's words and action in town had told her that, had made her come to this decision.

Now the rain had let up a little, and it did not have its early intensity. The trails, though, were muddy, but she rode as fast as possible. There was a faint chance that Weldon was at the C Bar and she rode that way first, but when she came to the bunkhouse the boys were playing cards and lounging on their bunks.

"Weldon around?" she asked.

A man said, "He was over this afternoon, Miss, for about a half hour, I'd say. I don't know where he headed for after that."

"He's back at the Circle Y," said a thin man.

She said, "Will you get me a fresh horse, Jim?"

She waited in the bunk-house until the horse was led to the door. The men were silent, now; they bid in low voices, shoving their chips out; there was no unnecessary talking. They were old C Bar hands; most of them had been hired by her father. They had never been for Weldon or Weldon's ways and, when she had broken with him, she knew they had been feeling better. But now she was joining with Weldon again and they felt, but did not voice, their displeasure. This feeling lay heavily across them, and she was aware of it. She felt relieved when Jim led the horse toward her. She said, "Thanks, Jim," and stepped up.

The trail to the Circle Y was steeper and more slippery and the night was in its middle when she reached the ranch. She was wet and cold and now she was beginning to wonder why she had come. The house was dark and the outbuildings, too, held no lights, but a man's voice challenged her from the brush.

"That's far enough, fellow."

She drew rein.

The man came out and she recognized him. "Where's Jib?" she asked.

"Well, now, Miss Elaine," the man said, recognizing her voice. "Right now, I'd say, Jib's in the house. There was a light there about two minutes ago, just went out. Ike's with him."

Elaine Jordan rode to the house and called, "Hello, Jib Weldon." There was a short pause and then the light showed in the house. Jib Weldon came to the door and said, "Come in, Elaine."

She entered. Ike lay on his bed, reading an old magazine. Weldon said, "And what brings the queen of the C Bar to the Circle Y this rainy night?"

She said, "Don't get sarcastic, Weldon."

"Touchy, huh," he murmured. "Well, what is it, Elaine?"

"I just came from Cottonwood. Tod Lambert just rode into town."

Jib Weldon stood there for a moment and then he looked at Ike. He said, quietly, "Now I'll be damned," and Ike put down his magazine and asked, "Did I hear you right, woman?"

"You did," said Elaine. "Why the worried look, Jib?"

Jib Weldon said, "Come in and shut the door." He sat down on a rawhide-backed, home-made chair and looked at Ike. He said, "I guess we bungled that, huh?"

Ike nodded.

Elaine asked, "You bungled what, Jib?"

"A COUPLE of nights back," said Weldon, "we shot Tod Lambert, but he fell off the cliff in the dark, and next morning we couldn't find him. The brush is awful thick down there but we looked good, too, and finally we come to the conclusion that he was dead in the brush."

"So that's why he rode that way," said Elaine.

"What way?" asked Ike.

"Stooped in his saddle, like he was sick."

"He's sick all right," said Weldon. "That means, I suppose, that he talked, and Harry Carter heard his story?"

"Carter saw him ride into town."

Weldon said to Ike, "That means we have to kill Carter."

"Drummond was in town, too," said Elaine. "He was visiting Julia Lambert when Tod came in."

Weldon looked at her, his eyes sharp. "How did you know?"

She told him.

He said, "So he brushed you off, huh? And you came back to me, and now you want to fight. Is that it, Elaine?"

"I'll fight him," she said. "If I don't fight with you, I'll fight alone. I hold the notes on the Drummond ranch, you don't. You don't hold a card in your hand except one; and that is yourself."

"And my gunmen."

She said, scornfully, "Gunmen, hell! They're a bunch of scum who'll stay by you when you're in the lead but when you start dragging they start leaving you."

"I have my plans," murmured Weldon.

"I know what they are," said Elaine Jordan, "and so do the rest of the people in Milk river valley. You intend to whip the Drummonds, and then you'll turn on me. I've known that all the time, Jib."

He said, his eyes lidded: "You have a good head, Elaine." He got to his feet and went to the table. He leaned against it, both hands spread flat on its top, and he said, "Okay, you win. You've got those notes, I haven't. We play fifty-fifty, huh?"

She nodded. "You know what that means, don't you?"

"Who doesn't?" he asked. "It means either Drumond dies, or either I die. That the answer you want?"

"That's the only answer."

Weldon said, "You'd better go home, woman. Carter might come tonight, and there'll be hell to pay."

After she had gone, Ike said to Weldon, "What'll we do, Jib?"

Weldon said, "Kill Carter, of course."

"But he's the law around here."

Weldon said, quietly, "What if he is. When he's dead, we'll be the law. This thing played out all right, Ike. I've known all the time that, sooner or later, we have to kill Carter or buy him off. And he won't sell, so we have to kill him. It had to come sooner or later."

"When do you think he'll ride out here?"

"Don't know, Ike. Doubt if he knows himself. Might be tonight, he might be on Elaine's hoofmarks; might be tomorrow, might be later. One thing is certain, and that is this: he saw Elaine and knows that she saw Lambert, and he might figure that she rode out to tell us. He'll be wary as hell."

Ike said, "I'll stay in the brush. We'll ride him into a trap and kill him."

Weldon said, "That'll be it, Ike. We're in this together, fellow. There ain't nothin' that Tod won't tell, and he'll tie you in well enough to hang you an' me, both."

They drew their plans, and made them complete. Ike took his slicker and his rifle; he crammed shells into one pocket, and then he said, looking at his bed: "I'll miss you tonight," and went into the rain. Weldon watched him go and noticed that soon the rain hid him, and then Weldon turned to his bed. He lay down, fully dressed, and went over it in his mind; the plan was complete, the trap would be set. And he hoped, soon, that Harry Carter would ride into it.

He waited, and listened, but he went to sleep.

* * * *

HARRY CARTER got to his feet and said, "I'll get the coroner to come down here," and then, looking at Julia Lambert, he added sincerely, "I'm sorry too, Miss. I'm sorry for you and sorry for him. He had a life ahead of him and it would have been a good life but he just met the wrong people."

Drummond asked, "What are you going to do?"

"The county attorney will get the judge to swear out a warrant for me against Ike and Jib Weldon. And then I'll serve it."

Drummond said, "I'll ride with you, Carter."

Carter said, evenly, "Thanks, Drummond. But I sort of like to trail alone, but the offer is appreciated."

Carter lifted his hat and left. Drummond said to Julia, "I'll be with you for a while until the coroner comes."

The girl had been crying, but her tears were over now. She said, "Thank you, Drummond," and then sat silent. Almost a half hour later the coroner came in with a stretcher; he had an assistant. They put the limp form of Tod Lambert on the canvas and carried him into the rain.

The coroner, a heavy man, said: "My missus is coming over to stay

with you, Miss Lambert." He hesitated, then said: "I'm sorry, Miss, I really am."

Julia said, tonelessly, "Thank you, sir."

Drummond waited until the coroner's wife came. She was like her husband, sturdy and solid, and she was good and clean. She said, "You'll come over to our place, won't you, now?" and then to Drummond, "You'll excuse her, Mr. Drummond?"

Drummond nodded and said, "Goodbye, Julia," and followed them outside. The rain had slackened somewhat; there were a few stars. The women went into the night and Drummond stood there, watching them go; then he turned, and went to the livery barn, where he found Latigo Jones tying his horse to the manger.

"What are you doin' here, Latigo?"

The negro said, "Figured maybe you might ride into somethin', Len."

"Why figure that?"

"Right after you left camp, some Drummond men rode in. Weldon and his riders burned down the Drummond ranch last night." The black man's voice was low. "I thought maybe you'd hear about it in town and head out on the warpath singlehanded. And I wanted to be close to side you."

Drummond murmured, "I never heard about it, Latigo." He ran over the thing in his mind, and held his temper. "Let's see what Harry Carter does. He's got enough on Weldon to hang him." He told the negro about Tod Lambert.

"He was a nice fella," the negro said. "He just got in the wrong company when he was too young."

They rode out then, heading toward the roundup camp. Harry Carter stood in the shadows in front of his office and watched them leave. The heavy man's eyes were solid with conjecture, but it did not concern Drummond or Latigo; it was busy with the thought of Jib Weldon.

Carter went inside and sat in his chair. He did not light a lamp. The night moved across its allotted space and still he sat there, listening to the rain. The rain was abating; it had less ferocity, and it was playing itself out. The dawn was creeping through it, and the dawn had little color.

Sounds were beginning to stir in the darkness now, and Carter gave each its classification. The heavier sound was made by the Greek cook in the Steerhead, cleaning his heavy pots behind that building; that sound finally went away, and Carter got to his feet. The Greek was behind the counter when he entered.

"You're first, Harry," said the Greek.

Carter said, "Good morning, George," and took the end stool. He ordered and ate slowly. A man came in and said, "Howdy, Sheriff," and then added: "I hear Tod Lambert got killed."

"That's right," said Carter. His voice was abrupt and the man was silent, and the Greek said, "It'll be hard on his sister."

"I reckon so," said Carter.

When he came out again, the rain had gone; there was a trace of sunlight, and he went to his office. He sat there for an hour, smoking a cigar, waiting for life to swing in its course in this town, and when that time arrived, he went to the courthouse and got a warrant from the county attorney. He put it in his jacket pocket, got a horse from the livery, and rode toward the C Bar.

He let his horse set its own pace, a fast running-walk. He was solid in the saddle; he had no give, no softness. The horse was quick and tough, and he was not sweating when they came into the C Bar. The dampness was rising from the earth, and the sun held a hint of heat.

There was nobody at the bunkhouse; his glance told him that. Weldon was not here, he figured, but still there might be a chance. His knock brought Binnie to the door.

"Miss Elaine in, Binnie?"

"Well, howdy, sheriff," the negress said. "Yes, she's having her coffee. Elaine, you've got company."

Elaine Jordan came to the door and said, "Come in, Sheriff," and Carter

followed her, carrying his hat. "Coffee?" she asked.

"No thanks," said Carter. "Where's Jib Weldon?"

She said, "I don't know. Why ask?"

Carter said, "I have a warrant. Tod Lambert died." He added, "But he talked, first."

"Weldon won't surrender."

"I expect that," said Carter quietly.

"He isn't here," she said.

Carter said, "Thank you, Miss," and stepped out. He halted on the porch, his eyes level, and asked: "You're not in this, are you, girl?"

"No."

He put on his hat and said, "Good day, Elaine," and to Binnie, "Thank you kindly, Binnie," and his boot found stirrup. They stood on the porch watching him go, and he put the horse to a trot. He rode forward on stirrups, hands braced against the fork, but he did not ride to the Circle Y.

Rather he swung to the south, and then the hills held him. The run-off had been quick, here, and the ground was drier, but yet he did not ride fast, but he let the horse set its pace. Weldon was in this too deep, and Weldon would never run.

The sun was almost at noon when he reached a high point. He was behind the Circle Y ranch. He left his horse in the high buckbrush and reached the summit on foot; he carried his glasses, and his rifle. He squatted against the sandstones and looked at the ranch below.

The sight had its beauty, and he let this touch him. Below were trees and grass and cattle and the endless sweep of the land, and this land should have had no trouble. He let this play in his mind, and pinned all the strife on Weldon. He took his glasses from their case; his heavy fingers turned the focusing screw, and the ranch below became sharp and clear against his vision.

There was a few head of horses in a corral, and that was the only sign of movement. They were running around, the dust pluming behind them; for the rain had soaked in, and already there was dust. He knew that something was causing them to run, and he found that cause to be Weldon.

Weldon was in the middle of the corral, and his noose lay behind him. Carter saw the rope snake out and settle around a horse's front legs. Weldon braced his feet, the horse hit the end of the rope, and the horse went down. Now Weldon was moving in, he was keeping the rope taut; now he was sitting on the horse, tying his four feet. The other horses settled down and watched.

Weldon had the forge outside the corral, and there were live coals in the steel basin. He climbed the corral and went to the forge, turning the blower, and Carter saw the flame. Carter settled back and said, "He's shoeing horses. . . ."

He let his glasses down, and looked at the brush surrounding the house and buildings. But the distance was too far and his sight too uncertain, so he raised the glasses again. They moved over the brush, probing it carefully, and Carter saw no sign of danger.

He leaned back and said, "This doesn't make sense. . . ." Weldon knew by now, he felt sure of that, and yet Weldon was below him, shoeing horses. This thing did not add up correctly; there were some digits missing, that threw the answer off. The sun was warm and bright, now, and he leaned back against the rocks, and closed his eyes. He sat for some time like that, the sun bright on him; then the overthrust of rock interfered, and he was in the shadows.

AGAIN he took the glasses, and again he studied the brush. For thirty minutes or so, with time ticking dully past him, he sat and watched, and then he saw what he wanted. The man had moved once, and Carter had seen that move and marked his hiding spot.

But he did not got down the slope; he sat there for almost another hour, still watching the brush. He saw no other man and he thought, "That must be all," but yet he was cautious, and held his time. Weldon had shod almost all of the horses, now, and the

sun was heeling low, and Carter knew the time was there.

Accordingly, then, he swung back behind the hill, and circled its base. This way he traveled through the thicker brush, and he was hidden. He had done this many times before, and this was but another to be stored in his memory. Therefore the way and method was old, and he executed it properly.

The remembrance of the terrain lay sharp in his mind, and he made no false detours. He came in behind the hidden man and stood there and watched him for a long moment. He knew him as a Weldon rider and then he said, "Mitchell, lay down that rifle, and stand up with your hands high."

Mitchell did not reach for his rifle, and at first he did not get to his feet. He was lying on his belly; he looked up without rolling. He said, "Harry Carter, well I'll be damned!"

"Get up," ordered Carter.

Mitchell put his feet under him and stood with his hands at his shoulders. He said, "Can't a man lay in the brush and stalk a deer, Carter?"

"I guess not," murmured Carter. "I'm takin' your guns, Mitchell."

Mitchell said, "Okay," and his hands went down.

Carter said, gruffly, "Keep those hands up. *I'll* unbuckle your guns." He pulled the loose end of the belt, and the guns and leathers were in his hands. He knelt, his eyes on Mitchell, and took the rifle. He broke it and pumped the cartridges out of it and handed it back to the man.

"You carry this," he said.

Carter pulled the guns from holsters and stuck them under his belt, throwing the leathers away. They went through the brush, then, moving toward the house, and Carter holstered his own gun. He said, "Go to the corral."

WELDON saw them coming. He was heating a horseshoe and he stopped the blower, and spread his legs wide. He had no leather on him but Carter saw the bulge above his belt under his shirt.

Carter said, "You're under arrest, Weldon."

"The charge?" said Weldon.

"Tod Lambert died last night, but before he died he talked. The warrant says murder."

Weldon looked at Mitchell. "What happened to you?"

Mitchell spread his hands. "I was out stalkin' a deer. Carter came behind me and jumped me. I guess a man has no liberties nowadays."

"I'm taking you both into town," said Carter. "We'll get a charge against you, Mitchell."

Weldon said, "That'll be all right," and his hands were low. Ike came out of the brush, then, ten feet away. Carter heard him and moved to one side, and then he saw him. He thought, "Well, I'm trapped." Ike had his rifle on him.

He said, "You lookin' for me, too, Carter?"

Carter nodded.

Ike looked at Weldon. Weldon nodded slightly. Carter thought, "Even if I had my gun out, I wouldn't have any chance." The cycle had run out and this knowledge was dead in him; it had great weight.

The rifle spoke four times. Carter sagged in the middle and went to his knees. He stood like that for a while, and Ike held the trigger back. When he looked at Weldon, Ike was white-faced.

"He got any pulse?" he asked.

Weldon said, "Keep hold of yourself." He felt the arm and found no life, and he let the hand fall. It lay against the ground, and there was no movement in it.

"No pulse," murmured Weldon.

CHAPTER XIV

THEY reached the roundup camp by morning, and Web Drummond was on his bed. The cook said, "He hurt his back."

Drummond stood silent, and looked down at his uncle. "What happened, Web?"

"Night guard," said Web. "Horse stumbled and slid, and threw me. Pulled some of the muscles loose, I reckon."

"Think you ought to see the doc?"

"There ain't no bleedin'," said Web. "Damn it to hell, can't a man just hurt himself a little? Am I a hundred an' ten years old?"

Drummond looked at Latigo Jones. "He'll live," he said, wryly. "If he can still cuss he'll pull through."

The last night guard was coming in and the day herders were riding out. The circle men sat on their heels around the fire and consumed hot coffee. They were going to move the wagon that afternoon, and two of the riders were going to do the shoeing. Drummond and Latigo rolled out their blankets under the cook's canvas.

They slept until noon, and then rode out to the herd. It had grown that day; now it numbered about five hundred steers, and they were heavy beef. Drummond ran his glance over it and found it good. He did not take circle that afternoon; he stayed with the herd, letting Latigo Jones pilot the circle riders. They took the herd south, moving it toward Cottonwood.

They made their next camp on the Dahl Springs. Here the ground was not so rough, and it was drying rapidly. The sun was warm, now, and man and beast alike appreciated that. By nightfall the herd had grown two hundred head. Drummond rode back to the wagon, where Web lay.

"Another two days of this," he said, "and we'll have our number."

Web said, "How about Weldon?"

"We'll see what Carter does," said Drummond.

He ate, crosslegged. He roped a fresh horse and rode to the herd. The steers had quieted; they grazed now, they did not move so much. Drummond rode around them and had his thoughts.

Elaine Jordan had broken her silence; now she was with Weldon. He toyed with this, and found nothing in it. There was danger, of course, but beyond the danger, there was little else. You had your decisions to make and you made them and they cut you from some people and brought you closer to others.

But there was some significance to it, and he was aware of that. Together they had a great power and if they won, they would use this power. Elaine held the key to the Drummond ranch and because she had come back, Weldon would use this key. The whole thing pivoted around Harry Carter. Carter held the power to keep this war from flaring too high.

Weldon had stepped too far, and Carter had direct evidence. If Carter gained the upper hand and broke Weldon, then Elaine's fight was gone; she was a woman, and a woman cannot fight without a man. The thing would be done, then; the settlement would be there.

But if Weldon ran over Carter, then Weldon would be strong and his blood would be hot. He would move into open warfare, then, and he would strike. The thing would settle down to strength and the clash was inevitable.

Next morning the rider came in and said, "I just came from Cottonwood, Drummond. Thoutht I'd come out and let you know. Harry Carter's dead."

Drummond nodded and said to himself, "So Weldon got the upper hand," and then: "Weldon kill him?"

"I guess so. They found him last night on the Beaver crick road. His horse was close by. The county attorney said he left to serve a warrant on Weldon and Ike."

"What else?"

"Nothing else, I guess. Carter was the law and he's gone, and there ain't no law no longer until the county commissioners can elect a new sheriff. They wanted that red-headed deputy to take it but he said no and got to hell out of the country."

"Thanks," said Drummond.

The order went out and the Drummond men rode light in leather that night, but dawn finally came and the herd was intact. The riders had swung out and the men were coming in that morning, leaving their haycrews despite the fact that the hay had to be turned, due to the rain. They rode circles in pairs and they had rifles, and the feeling was heavy.

The herd grew and the next night they had almost nine hundred head.

There was a buyer in Cottonwood waiting for them and they would corral there a night before driving into Glasgow. The town was a day away and the tenseness left them, but that night the Weldon men struck.

THE moon was bright and they rode into it, and the cattle broke before them. They came from the hills, working down the coulees, and when they were close they rode in, and they came fast. Drummond and Latigo were riding together, and Drummond said, "Here they come."

"Sure are," said Latigo.

The roar was louder, now; it was like a waterfall, growing as you came nearer. Cattle were moving, and through this roar came the rap of guns. The light was dim, though, and shooting uncertain. You get a man lined up and he'd ride past you, and the dust was thick and there was a lot of confusion. You might hit him and you might not.

"There they go," said Drummond.

The cattle were breaking into a wild run, a disordered run. They were heading north, back to their old home range. Drummond cursed and rode for the mess wagon, wondering if the cattle would run that way and, if they did, he would try to head them and keep them away from Web, who was in camp.

He sent his horse through the steers, riding his spurs, his pistol up. A bullet came along, it knocked a steer to his knees. Drummond turned in saddle and his hammer fell, but the rider was a dim shadow moving fast against the dusty backdrop. And Drummond knew his bullet had missed.

The fight had spread out, now, moving in a line with the cattle. They were missing the mess wagon so Drummond rode his hooks, sending the horse to the head of the herd. A man whipped across his vision, riding fast, and Drummond shot three times. He saw the horse move on, its saddle empty. The stirrups were flapping and the reins had looped around the horn, and the horse ran with its head high and went into the hills.

There was resentment in him, and it drove him hard. There was no anger; there was coldness, but it was controlled. Elaine Jordan had made her move, and she would not profit. She was playing into Weldon's hands, and she knew it; but she was hitting back at him because of her pride. She would get nothing from this and Weldon would be the gaining person.

He was riding along the herd now, turning the steers in; so far, they had kept them bunched, they had not broken. A few, of course, had drifted into the hills, but not many would make their escapes.

They had run for three miles now, and they were tiring. Drummond saw Latigo Jones, riding ahead, and he sent his horse to the negro. The black man was smiling, but it was not a pretty smile. His .45 was out, and he held it high.

"They're breakin' it up," he said. "They're driftin' out, Drummond."

Drummond said, "Did you see what I saw?"

Latigo looked at him. "The girl?"

Drummond nodded. "I almost shot at her before I recognized her."

Latigo said, hoarsely, "I almost did the same."

The Weldon men had left now, and the cattle were tired. Drummond went back, looking at his men; two of them were dead, and one was wounded. He went back to the man he had shot and the man lay against the pounded earth, a shadow without movement. Drummond stepped down and looked at him and then at Latigo Jones.

"You know him?"

"They called him Ike," said Latigo, quietly. "He was Jib Weldon's right-hand man, and I guess he had it coming."

"Let's hope so," murmured Drummond.

* * * *

THE Weldon men met beneath the boxelders; they were a grim group, and Weldon said, "Well, that didn't do much, I guess. Only told them they had a fight on their hands. Where's Ike?"

"Ike," said a man, "is dead." He added, "So is Clark and Bergstrom."

"Part of the game," murmured Weldon. He looked at Elaine Jordan and said, "Pretty nice, huh?"

"I don't think so."

"War is tough," said Weldon.

A few men were wounded, but their wounds were shallow; they bound them and rode south. Weldon was thoughtful, and he felt the keen edge of anger. The thing had gone wrong, and he drew only one substance from it.

He summed this up, adding it in his mind; he rolled it over and over, examining it from all angles, and he knew that the next time he saw Len Drummond, he would have to kill Drummond, or Drummond would kill him. He let this play in his thoughts, and he knew he would force the meeting. Now that things had run their course and made this inevitable, he looked forward to it.

Elaine Jordan was silent on the ride back. She had gone along, knowing what she was riding into, but the brutality of it had never seemed so harsh until the guns had started their songs, the cattle had taken up their stampede. This was all on a new plane, now; she saw the problem in its full light, and that light was glaring. She had stepped out beyond the rim of the law, and that step had shown her.

She had seen Drummond, back there at the herd. He had lifted his gun and she had come out of the dust; he had recognized her, and his gun had lowered. She thought, it all happened fast but I can never forget it. She found no satisfaction in this, but she held it because of its bitterness, and she knew that she had run her time out, that the cards had not fallen, and she was holding a cold hand.

They parted at the fork on Cottonwood creek, and Weldon lifted his hand and murmured, "See you later, Elaine," and then he and his men had ridden away, going toward the Circle Y. She sat there and watched them out of sight, watched until the rise of the hill came between them, and then she rode to the C Bar.

She came in at dawn, and there was color across the sky. Silence lay across the hills and the cook had not yet stirred in the cookshack. She unsaddled her horse and turned him into the pasture and then returned to the barn. There was an iron-grey gelding tied to the rack and she saddled him and made him ready. Then she went to the house. Binnie heard her enter and came from her room. She was shapeless and dark in her old robe, but Elaine had no eyes for that now.

Binnie asked, "I looked in your room after midnight an' you were gone. I've been up, waiting."

Elaine sat down. She lay her hat on the floor, her golden hair fell. She said, wearily, "Please, Binnie, please."

The negress said, quietly, "You were with Weldon?"

"We raided the Drummond herd."

Binnie said, "Oh," and then waited, her face impassive. The brittleness had left Elaine; she was tired, and she leaned back.

She said, "This is it, Binnie."

"What do you mean?"

She said, "I'm selling the C Bar."

BINNIE asked, "Is Drummond behind it?"

Elaine nodded. "You could say that, I guess." Weariness was with her; it was deep. She thought, "It was all mixed up, from the start, and nothing could come out of it, it held no promise." Aloud she said, "I'm riding for Miles City and I'll meet you there. You go to Cottonwood and see Martin Gray and he'll put the C Bar up for sale. He's a good lawyer and he knows all about the

BUY MORE BONDS

ranch" She sent her eyes around the room; she had known it all her life, and she found it hard to leave. But she shut this from her and steeled herself. "My uncle in Colorado has ben wanting me to sell and come to live with him since Aunt Jessie died. We'll go there, Binnie."

The woman's eyes lighted. "And there'll be no more strife, Miss Elaine?"

Elaine smiled and said, "No more, Binnie, never."

"You're tired, child."

"Not physically," said Elaine, quietly. She got to her feet and crossed the room and kissed Binnie on the cheek. "You'll take care of things here, dear, then, and I'll meet you in Miles City in a few days. I'll be at the Yellowstone Hotel."

"I'll be there, Miss Elaine."

Elaine looked back once—she was riding beyond the gate, then—and Binnie stood in the doorway, and Elaine lifted her hand. She turned then and looked toward the south, and the hills stretched endlessly across the space.

They rode that night and when the sun came up they were about fifty cattle short. These had drifted into the gullies and coulees. They turned the herd into the dawn, pointing it to the south, and riders went out wide to pick up the strays. By midforenoon the herd was in the basin, moving across the level land.

Drumond had sent a scout ahead; the man rode in at noon. The buyer was waiting in Cottonwood, but he wanted delivery at Glasgow; when the cattle were safely at the railhead, then he would pay for them. Drummond nodded and rode back to Web, who sat in the bed wagon.

"Afraid Weldon might step in," said Web. "The buyer figures maybe Weldon will highjack the herd."

"Weldon and his crew are in town, Web."

Web said, his voice low, "He aims to press a showdown. Send the boys in and I'll give them more shells." He looked at Drummond and added, "He'll be after your blood, Len."

"He might get it," said Drummond; "and he might not, too."

Drummond rode to the herd, passing the word around, and the men rode in for cartridges. The cattle was tired and they shuffled along, the dust tailing behind them lazily. There was no danger of Weldon and his crew running into them here on the level, and Drummond figured Weldon would do no more against the cattle; when Weldon moved, and move he had to, he would move directly against him, and that move would be with guns.

They reached the town in late afternoon. There were huge corrals along the river in the cottonwoods; they held the herd there, splitting it up and putting so many head in each corral. People were drifting out from town and they sat on the bars, watching the steers pour into the corrals.

The buyer was a stout man who sweated profusely. He moved with a heavy indifference and his eyes missed nothing. Web Drummond got his crutches and hobbled to a corral, and the buyer offered him a cigar. Web took the cigar, broke it, and stuck half in his mouth.

"Nice beef, Web."

"That, from you, is an admission," said Web. "That is the first time I ever heard you tell the truth. Got a drink?"

The buyer had. They drank and offered the bottle to Drummond, who shook his head. Web asked, "How about a check, right now? We guess the weight, huh?"

The buyer shook his head. "In Glasgow," he said.

"Once?" asked Web.

"As many times as you ask, the answer'll be the same. Glasgow, Web. When I buy cattle, I want them in the cars. You can't stampede them or lose them, then."

Web said, "Okay, Glasgow. Tomorrow."

They left a few men at the corrals and the rest rode into town. They racked their horses in the livery barn and the oldster said, to Drummond: "Hey, when you bringin' back my whiskey horse?" but Drummond did not answer him. They went down the main street. Their rifles under their arms; there were

men loafing on the street, lounging in front of saloons, before stores.

"Weldon men," murmured Web.

Drummond said, quietly, "I wonder where Weldon is?"

"He's in the Bobtail saloon," said a puncher.

DRUMMOND said, "Drift into saloons and business houses on this side of the street. Two men always together and keep your eyes on either Web or me; they'll move against one or both of us. Now watch your backs and play them close."

"I'll stay with Web," said Latigo Jones.

Drummond nodded and moved ahead, alone. There was a quietness about this town, but it affected him little. The wind had come up slightly, and the down was coming from the cottonwoods. It moved slowly across the ground, catching on the board walks, hanging to the dust.

The Drummond hands had slowly disintegrated, moving into buildings, but the Weldon men stood in small groups, there on the sidewalks. Drummond sent his glance across them, but Weldon was not there, and he moved ahead.

When he passed the front of Julia Lambert's dress shop, the girl was standing in the doorway and Drummond murmured, "Better go inside Miss Lambert," and lifted his eyes to her. He held her glance for some time and when she spoke her voice was a whisper.

"He's in the Bobtail saloon, Drummond."

"I know," said Drummond. "Thanks."

She said, "I don't suppose I could talk you out of it?"

"He forced me to it," he said simply. "I have no other choice." His eyes were bright on her's, and they liked what they saw. There was this darkness about her, and it hinted of

The Colors Run Red When

DEATH PAINTS A PICTURE

Here is an absorbing murder mystery

by

RUSSELL GRAY

Look for it in the January 1945 issue of

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mystery; she was smooth and warm, and she was woman. He went ahead, thinking of this; it was in his thoughts when Jib Weldon came from the Bobtail. He lost it, then, and there was only Weldon.

Weldon came ahead and said, "Just a minute, Drummond," and Drummond turned. He faced him, then, and Weldon stopped. The street separated them, and across this the wind played, and the cottonwood down moved slowly. The Weldon men came forward and Drummond saw Web and Latigo come from their spot, and their men had rifles ready. Drummond glanced toward Julia; the girl stood there, yet.

Drummond said, "All right, Weldon," and he stepped into the street. Weldon, too, came forward; then he halted, and he spread himself wide. The wind moved across him and made his face sleek and hard. Drummond watched this hardness, and then he saw Weldon's right shoulder move.

The gun was heavy in Drummond's hand, and it left the leather with a swishing sound. Weldon was low and compact; his left shoulder was pushed ahead of him, and he was firing with his right gun. He made a thin line against the day and he was fast. Drummond heard the roar of the gun, then his own weapon was moving back. The hammer lifted and fell four times, and dirt lifted at Drummond's boots.

Weldon said, "By hell," and he leaned into the wind. He dropped his gun and became a husky ball of muscle, and he felt his knees bend. There was no strength in the wind and he leaned forward and went to his knees. His hands fell down; he braced himself. But his strength left and he lay forward on his face. The wind ruffled his shirt and a piece of cottonwood down brushed against his collar, and hung there.

Drummond turned suddenly; the bullet made him do that. It had come from a six-gun, and a Weldon man had dropped the hammer. It tore across Drummond's ribs, and then he saw the man falling, crashing down over his weapon. And Web Drummond's rifle was smoking. Web leaned against his crutches and said, "Any more of you Weldon men got any steam in you?"

One man said, gruffly, "Weldon's dead, ain't he?"

"If he ain't," said Web, "he oughta be."

"My hand's out," the Weldon man said. "Jib paid my wages; I fought for wages. I won't get any more." He kept his hands away from his guns as he walked down the street. A gray horse was racked there, and he went up and he rode away. Latigo Jones' voice was gruff. "How about the rest of you fellows?"

THEY were all out of cards; they turned and left, and they rode out. Drummond turned and walked toward Web, and his knees were weak. Latigo came out and took him, and Drummond leaned against him.

"Bust somethin', Drummond?"

Drummond breathed deep and said, "Sure hard to suck in wind." He felt tired, the tenseness left him. Julia Lambert came from her store and got on the other side of him, and he put his arm around her shoulder.

"Did you see it?" he asked.

She said, "Yes."

"You should have gone inside," he said.

She shook her head and they went down the street, Latigo Jones on one side, Julia Lambert on the other, and Web Drummond and his men following. The door was open and the doctor said, "Put him on the table."

Drummond sat down. Latigo Jones stood up but Julia Lambert sat down, too, and Drummond's arm was still about her. Her shoulders were firm and strong under his weight, there was a willowy strength in her. A man could depend on that strength to carry him over when his own strength ran low. He thought of this, and his fingers tightened around her shoulder.

"Go to work, doc," he said quietly.

THE END

STINGY MEN ARE SPENDTHRIFTS

By Joe Austell Small

(Author of "Bronc-Busting Gobbler," "Me and the Devil," Etc.)

Bettersave Mathis was a crusty old skinflint, but Me and Hodge had it all figured as to how we'd extract enough cash from him to keep the Bar Nothing ranch from being snatched away from us!

AN OLD cow bawls lonesome on the range. Down in the brushy hollow, a crow caws. The air's charged with electricity; seems like it'd crackle if you'd squeeze it. The sun's too hot for this time of day and the light's too yellow. It's the sort of weather that puts snakes and tarantulas on the crawl and makes the old prairie wolf howl from the high ridges.

Me and Hodge have been sitting there on the gallery of our little Bar Nothing ranch house all evening, watching that storm make in the north. Thunderheads have been boiling up out of the northwest and milling like thirsty cattle. Now they're bunching and forming a solid rain bank. She's a black one, moving down fast, rumbling and threatening.

The first big drops are scattered and big; they hit the ground hard and kick up the prairie dust like throwed rocks. Me and Hodge move inside, poke the wood fire into a blaze, light our old cobs and watch it rain through the window. It's good to sit by a big fireplace with a popping fire going and watch it rain outside. And, too, it gives me and Hodge some more time to talk about the idea that's been sparkling our eye-balls for going on a coupla days now.

Hodge crosses his legs, allowing his left hand to fold with the cross, takes a long draw on a blackened cob, and looks at me with mealy old eyes that fairly bubble. "Bettersave's the only man in the country that could afford to pay that much for a bull," he says.

"Yeah," I answer, "and he's a fool about fine blooded stock."

"It'd sure be a shame to lose this little ranch—hard as we've worked for it," Hodge allows. "Sale of that bull would tide us over. Le's go see old Bettersave."

"It's a long ride," I remind Hodge. "But maybe it'll work out."

Neither one of us say what's on our minds. Bettersave has seen our bull, wants him, made us a price—but we wouldn't sell. Now that we got to sell, we don't much believe he'll buy at our price. He's stingy, that man—damned stingy.

Old Bettersave Mathis owns the Running Chaparral spread. He's got plenty money but is so tight he squeaks when he walks. So we're pretty certain the old man won't give us the price we ask; and it's gonna have to be that price if we save the ranch.

"Old Bettersave's gonna be tough," Hodge declares. "He oughtn't to be so stingy. Why that old dried up prune's got money salted away—a layer of salt and a layer of dollars, a layer of salt and a layer—"

"Yeah, but you couldn't sell that man a cartridge if he 'as bein' charged by a mad bear!" I declare.

Hodge looks at me and grins mysterious. Seems like he's had an idea all of a sudden. "We'll sell him all right," he says. "We'll sell him—"

NOW this Bettersave Mathis gent is a sort of shriveled little man with a withered face. Durned fellow looks like he'd been weaned on a pickle. Looks even tighter than he did when we last saw him, so I'm ready to head back; but Hodge he says no, that he knows old Bettersave's one weak spot.

So we take the man quail hunting. Old Bettersave has known us for a long time of course, but when he finds out what we want for the bull, the old man don't act near as friendly as he did the last time we saw him.

Hodge adopts a far away look in his eyes and drools: "Shore run across a quail par'dise comin' over yest'iddy. Thought maybe we'd drop by there today and—"

So we take old Bettersave quail hunting—

* * * *

As we crawl into natural quail country through a rusty barbed wire fence, I appeal to Hodge's sense of reasoning for the third time. "You may know what we're doin', but if old Bodker catches us in here—"

"Don't worry none," Hodge winks at me over his shoulder. "Old Bodker'll be in town—this is Saturday evenin'!"

The day before, we'd found out that this small ranch is the best in the country for quail. But we found out too that it belongs to a man known as old Bodker, the Mad Hun. The whole thing don't sound good to me from the start, but Hodge he ain't so sure. He reminds me that everybody has told us that no better quail hunting could be had in the state than on the Bodker ranch. I remind him right back, of course, that they follow this information with a lifting of the eyebrows and a remark like "And far as I'm concerned—there'll be good quail hunting there as long as it belongs to the Mad Hun!"

But Hodge reminds me that we've got a ranch at stake, and it don't make no never mind about hunting on a man's property without asking if you're doing it for a good cause. So I just cross my fingers and hope.

BETTERSAVE don't exactly know where we are; we take him a roundabout way, and use nearly a day to get there. And if Bettersave does wonder, he thinks of course that this rancher is a friend of ours and we've got permission to hunt on his land.

Now old Satan's not a bird dog but he can find quail; me and Hodge wouldn't own a dog that couldn't. And when we cross over that fence into country that hasn't been hunted in years, old Satan nearly goes plumb crazy. He's jumping four ways at once, twisting his tail like a hoss with a burr under the saddle. Hodge is walking on tiptoe, strutting like a wild gobbler in the springtime. He's got that old corn sheller he calls a shotgun waving in the breeze.

You've got to give credit to that old hound dog. He works that cover like an Indian squaw combing lice out of her buck's hair. The old dog raises his muzzle a bite to catch the drift, then works easy around an oak brush thicket. They've moved up on him but he nails the birds dead away in a sprouting of needle grass they take to after leaving a yaupon thicket.

Well, we have some almighty fun there for better'n half an hour. It just ain't no use of this many quail being on any one ranch. Old Bodker has got everybody buffaloed so, they're scared even to look over that barbed wire fence into the forbidden quail heaven—much less crawl over and start hunting.

I can see, too, that old Bettersave, although of course he's heard about the Mad Hun, don't know we're hunting on his land! The Hun's ranch is a long way from old Bettersave's Running Chaparral spread and he ain't too acquainted with all the small ranches over in this part of the county.

Me and Hodge are smiling like a jackass eating briars and old Bettersave's face is lit up like he'd just struck a match to a kerosene cheek massage. It's the best quail hunting we've seen in many a day.

Old Satan levels down on a single and we let old Bettersave take it. I

never saw a quail do like this one. He quits the ground in a blur, cuts sharp to the right, circles a thicket, dips low and twists like a tornado down a shallow draw. Old Bettersave wheels and cuts loose just as that bird tops a short stand of dogwood. He don't get a feather. But he does stir up something else—

THE long beller that comes from behind that clump of yaupon brush that old Bettersave shoots into sounds like the death wail of a mad hant with hi-life in his eyes. Sort of deep rumblings, saddle-squeakings, brush popping, and some torrid cussing floats out to our worried ears. Then a wild-eyed bronc bucks into view, and a blur of spinning humanity goes over his head. A muzzle loader sails off into the brush. Out of the dust then a human form rises unsteadily.

Now it ain't hard to visualize what Old Scratch must look like when you're staring into the face of Bodker, the Mad Hun. The man's big and blustering too—a pants full and a hat empty if ever I saw one!

Bodker is blood-spattered and dust-covered. It ain't hard to see that he's stopped a few of them small shot old Bettersave meant for the quail. His hoss met a few too, and I guess that's why he has pitched old Bodker off in the dust. The shot won't hurt the old man none, but they've burnt him right sharply and it ain't helped his temper a whole lot.

When he sees who's responsible for this little unfortunate accident, he looks us over with eyes that'd lit a fresh-stuffed pipe at twenty paces. "Trespassin' on private property, shootin' my quail, blastin' me in the belly—why I'll—" There's a cold, meanful tone to the Mad Hun's voice. It makes your skin pimple up like a shriveled lemon.

He's walking forward now slowly, in the manner of a big panther stalking a weak little goat. Then he chargs us like a rabid sow. His deep-down rumbling makes you think of a boar hog caught in barbed wire. His fists are big knots on hairy arms and he's waving them in the air.

"Why, that's the Mad Hun!" old Bettersave gasps and fades through the brush like a ball of morning mist hit by an August sun.

Hodge takes one look at the maniac-touched eyes of that human monster bearing down upon us, sucks in his breath, and melts away from there so fast the loose leaves follow his air suction. As for me, my eyes pop out like I've just seen the devil kiss an angel, and I follow that hole Hodge has knocked in the timber. Even old Satan yowls like he's just witnessed a scared skeleton talking to a jittery ghost and he runs along beside us with a sort of barking howl, the hair standing straight up on his neck.

WAL, sir, when we get stretched out through them thick woods, it sounds like a cattle stampede through the dry brush! I know Hodge has gained on me over that quarter mile sprint when I hear barbed wire squeak and a staple pop out. Looks like Hodge ain't bothering none about crawling through and that fence is too high for jumping.

Another Top-Hand Tale of Rangeland Fun

"BRONC - BUSTING GOBBLER"

By JOE AUSTELL SMALL

Appears in the January Issue of

DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

Hodge has aimed for an opening between the lower barbed strand and the hog wire, and he'd a-made it sure if the seat of his pants hadn't bowed up a little too far. But Hodge don't mind leaving part of his pants on the fence. Fact is, he don't even look back.

Old Bettersave's in a right peart hurry too. He don't cotton to the way Hodge has out-sprinted him. But Hodge's tracks don't have a chance to cool much before old Bettersave's in them and he hollows the tracks out some at that. The old man leaves most of the lower end of a suit of clothes on that barbed wire fence.

My tongue's hanging out when I finally drop to a log beside Hodge and old Bettersave. They're both panting and shivering like a wet dog in a fresh norther. We've hit the road too far up and our hosses are back down a ways. A little blowing won't hurt us none though before making for our mounts.

"N-n-never ran sooo much in m-m-my l-l-life!" old Bettersave pants. "C-c-couldn't run another s-s-step if my whole soul and body depended on it!"

But a man never knows what he can do in a tight. There's a rustling of brush from behind. We can just see that Mad Hun bearing down on us again and we've run fifty yards before we decide which way to go.

When we reach our hosses at last, Hodge rises and sails into his saddle without touching a hair. Old Bettersave tries to find the stirrup with his foot, making a hunk of racket like a calf stomping around on a tin roof. I plant my shovel firm in the saddle with no effort at all.

It's then that the shooting begins. The Mad Hun has dug his old streak of rust out of the bushes and followed our thunder all this distance. He's sending us his regards now. And the Hun must be using about number 4 shot in that old muzzle loader because one hits the cantle of my saddle and glances off, uzzing like an angry bumble bee.

Hodge swings his nag around, and we leave there so fast the air smells scorched.

WE FIND a spring branch and camp that night. Me and Hodge picks the birds we finally bagged and roast them over the fire. Old Bettersave just sits there before the fire his eyes staring aimless into the fire. I've got a bottle in my hip pocket, so I start passing it around regular-like.

Finally, Old Bettersave comes to with a jerk. It's so sudden I can't help dodging sideways and throwing up a hand to protect my head. Makes me feel sort of silly when he starts laughing deep.

"Mean old scogie like that ought to have his quail shot out!" Bettersave allows. "You fellers shore looked funny though when he started at us!"

"Yeah," Hodge smiles sheepish. "Guess we did."

We eat the birds and sip on the bottle then. By the time it's dry, we've got old Bettersave ready to buy that bull. We don't wait until morning to clinch it. Hodge rakes a bill of sale out of his pocket and a check book. The details are through in no time. Then we sit back and watch the fire.

"Best quail I ever ate!" Bettersave allows. "And what shootin'! Man, what shootin'!"

"We got some pretty good quail shootin' on our ranch, come to think of it," Hodge reveals. "Come over and try it. Might even sell you our champion bull."

"Didn't know you had another good'un," Bettersave says. "I may try that quail huntin' at that!"

"What you mean tellin' him we got another bull for sale?" I ask Hodge when old Bettersave drops off to sleep.

"We'll hold out on him with a big price until one of our young'uns grows up," Hodge says. "Then we'll hunt quail all day and sell him that bull for a good price that night. Get him huntin' quail an' sippin' rye and old Bettersave's a plumb spendthrift! It'll take a good while for our young bulls to grow up, but we don't care. Last payment on our ranch don't come for six months yet nohow!"

THE END

When Two-Ton Tompkins spots a pretty filly, there's no livin' with him!

RUSTLIN' FOR ROMANCE

By Archie Joscelyn

Pardners like Two-Ton Tompkins are one of those curses which seem to be wrapped around honest, hard-working rustlers!

PARDNERS ain't a mixed blessing. They're one of these here curses that get wropped around your neck like that old man of the sea carryin' a whale or somethin', I disremember which, but it was a whale of a load. That's the way it is with pards. Me, I know. I'm burdened down with Two-Ton Tompkins.

That ought to be enough, when you consider that Two-Ton has made more'n one hoss sway-backed so that it doubled in value and could be sold to one of these here circuses, though it wa'n't ever Two-Ton or me that got to sell it. Added to that, Two-Ton's like some of these here pre-histronic monsters. The bigger they are, the less brain they have. Them's all plenty handicaps to a honest, hard-workin' rustler. But when you add the fact that Two-Ton falls for every pretty face he sees wearin' a skirt, and some not so pretty—well, you can mebby see what I'm up against.

It sure looked like we was settin' in clover here a while back, there at the Crazy C Ranch. It had been my idea, of course, to go get a job there, so we could get the lay of the land, pick our time and rustle us out a few hundred head of their beef, which was just about the best I'd set eyes on in a long time. They had so many beeves, we figgered they'd never miss mebby a couple hundred head or so.

Everything was going swell, even the grub. It was better than usual, being hashed up by a woman—Anne, she called herself. She was kinda tall for a woman, and her yellow hair looked like the pelt off a late calf, to me, and her hands was kinda like hams, but she could cook. I was congratulatin' myself that Two-Ton hadn't gone and fallen for her, the night we started to drive our beef to market, but I wrapped that one up too soon. It was a rotten egg that was already hatchin'.

We'd picked our time and place just like we'd planned, and had a nice

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bunch of three-year-olds cut out and started, with the moon just rollin' up over a hill and winkin' at us like it thought we was doing somethin' we hadn't ought to, when I hears a horse comin' after us, fast. Two-Ton hears it, too, and kind of rolls his eyes at me.

"Toothpicks," he says. "Do you reckon that mebby means trouble?"

"What else do you figger it means?" I demands sarcastic, and pulls my Peacemaker. Two-Ton, he kind of sighs and slews around in the saddle, reachin' for his own gun. I sees it's a single rider, comin' up fast across the field, and I'm sightin' along the Peacemaker when Two-Ton leans over and knocks the barrel up.

"Don't shoot, Toothpicks," he yells. "It's Anne!"

"Anne!" I says. "I sure ought to shoot—though which one of you. I don't rightly know."

I had a feelin' then that things was turnin' sour. To have been right, I should have shot both of them.

BUT by then, sure enough, Anne comes up, ridin' fast, and she pulls her hoss to a slidin' stop and gives a sort of yelp, like a pup that's been stepped on.

"Oh, Two-Ton!" she says. "And Toothpicks Malone! Am I ever thankful for havin' found you two big, strong men!"

Me, I seen the effects plenty often before. Anything in skirts that gushes words like that at Two-Ton just melts him down like soft butter. I can see it happenin' now, and it makes me plenty disgusted, even if he is my pardner.

"Why, Ma'am—uh, Miss Anne, what's wrong?" Two-Ton blurts. "What can we do for you?"

"I'm so thankful to find you both here, and right on the job," she explains. "I was afraid these cattle would be rustled tonight."

"Rustled?" Two-Ton gulps, and looks like he'd swallowed a fish without takin' off the fins. "Uh—did you say rustled?"

"I just got suspicious that somebody would try and rustle them, so

(Continued On Page 88)

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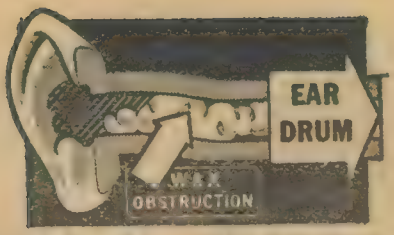

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(Continued From Page 86)

I rode out to see," she confides. "And here I find you boys lookin' after them, just as *sweet!* I couldn't afford to lose them, of course."

"Couldn't afford to lose 'em?" I repeats. "How come? All you do with 'em is to fry steaks off some of them, ain't it?"

"Well, not exactly," she confesses, still lookin' at Two-Ton with that drippin' expression, like fat spillin' into the fire. "You see—most folks don't know it, but I'm the real owner of the Crazy C. And it's such a job to run a ranch without a man!"

"I bet it would be," I agrees before Two-Ton can speak. "But from all I've observed, there's plenty men around the bunk house, most of the time."

"Oh, them?" she says, and kind of wiggles her shoulders. "That isn't just what I mean by a man. I—I was meanin' a—a husband, you know. A abig, strong man!" And the way she looks at Two-Ton, I see right then that ou night's work is going to be plumb wasted.

Two-Ton, he gulps again and gets red in the face, starin' back at her. I can tell that he figgers it'll pay better to be boss of the Crazy C than to steal some critters from it, but of course he don't even bother to think in practical terms like that. He's just sunk, and because it's come kind of later than usual this time.

Me, I'd hoped to get hard-boiled and keep going with the critters, figgerin' two men ought to be a match for one woman. But I know I ain't able to handle her and my own pard too, for Two-Ton can be as stubborn as a mule, and give that animal plenty pointers.

"Yeah, Ma'am—Miss Anne," Two-Ton splutters. "We—we was kind of fearin' somethin' might happen to these critters, too—so we got to thinkin' of yore int'rests, and we rode out here to make sure they was all right. We—we thought we'd move 'em around a little, so rustlers couldn't find 'em so easy."

"That was awful sweet of you boys, takin' such an interest in poor little me and my business," she replies. "I

(Continued On Page 90)

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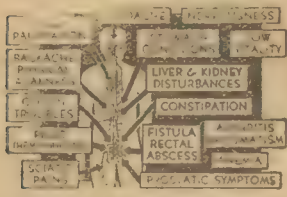

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(Continued From Page 88)

sure do need a big, strong man that takes such an interest, to help me run things. Now that you've got them started, though, we might as well take them across to the north range. I've been intending to have these critters moved there in a day or so anyway, and the job's half done now. I'll help you."

A LOT of things sounded funny to me, but I was just kind of taggin' along by then, and I had sense enough to know it. Them two was ridin' by theirselves off at the side, cut of the dust, leavin' me to handle the drag, while they looked at each other and the moon, and which of the three was the silliest, I couldn't make up my mind. I was wonderin' whether to go back and go to bed, knowin' they'd never notice the diff'rence, when a bullet come sizzlin' across the saddle right in front of me, buzzin' like a wasp and just about as friendly, and that kind of changed the complexion of things.

Me and Two-Ton, we always figger a certain amount of risk is bound tuh prevail in a business like ours, some people gettin' peevish when we want to help them share what they have wich us. But hot lead zippin' that close is just plain unfriendly, and it makes me annoyed. With Two-Ton, it makes him right-down mad. So when he pulls his gun and begins returnin' the compliment, I keeps a cool head and hustles the critters along till I reach a clump of trees. It's better to shoot back from such a place.

I'm a mite surprised to observe that Anne is shootin' back too, along with Two-Ton. Which is a right friendly gesture on her part, but kind of strange, when you stop to consider that it was some of the Crazy C crew that was after us. Looked like they didn't recognize their boss nor just understand what she wanted done with them cow critters.

I've unlimbered a few rounds of smoke at them, when I gets the feelin' of somethin' missin', and looks around to see about it. Somethin' is missing, all right. The critters have kept

(Continued On Page 92)

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 90)

going, which is a good idea on their part, but Anne has kept going along with them, and I sees right away that that ain't so good a notion. For she's headin' 'em off in a diff'rent direction from what we planned to set their little feets in, and likewise she's been joined by three-four other riders that's helpin' enthusiastic.

Right then I commences to smell somethin', and the odor is a lot less pleasant than skunk. I yells at Two-Ton, but I guess he don't just understand, him bein' dumb thataway anyhow. Since we been pards, I've taught him all I know, and the dumb fool still don't know nothing.

I can see there's something wrong here, with me and Two-Ton caught between two fires, so to speak. It looks to me like the best way to iron out misunderstandings would be to catch up with the critters again, and be heroes on one side or the other, whichever looks like it'd pay best. But that ain't so easy with Two-Ton bangin' lead back at the Crazy C crew the way he's doing.

All to once he does a nice somersault right off his horse, and I has a moment of regret, thinkin' some stray bullet has hit him, and that the end of poor old Two-Ton. But it seems it ain't nothin' like that. His horse has shied at a rabbit, jumpin' out from behind a bush, and Two-Ton bein' otherwise occupied, they've parted comp'ny. But it ain't more'n a minute after that 'fore Two-Ton catches up with his runnin' cayuse but overpasses it in his enthoosiasm, and has to swing back. The way he lands in the saddle again, you'd never think he was a heavyweight.

BUT that little misfortune of his has turned out good for us, distractin' Two-Ton's attention away from that lead-slingin' crew behind us, and as we dip down through a coulee, they kind of lose track of us for a while. Which don't make me feel bad, for I've had all the attention I feel like I can use for a spell.

Right now I'm anxious to catch up with them critters again, the four-legged ones we started to roamin', and the two-legged ones that are makin'

them roam the wrong way in the gloomin'. Way it looks to me, they're drivin' them in the wrong direction and makin' plenty free with what don't belong to them. And somethin' like that, such a total disregard for the rights of others, always does make me peevish.

We ain't gone far, though, before I makes the unpleasant discovery that them cattle and those trailin' them have done a vanishin' act, I pull my cayuse up to have a look around, and then things happen kind of fast, and I wish me and Two-Ton could disappear as sudden and complete as the critters. Only, like it usually is when you want something, it don't work out that way.

For all at once there's half a dozen of the Crazy C crew right there with us, comin' up sudden out of a dark coulee that I hadn't even known was there. Takin' advantage of us, they was, and in addition, they was madder'n what a wet hen is supposed to be, though such soaked chickens as I've ever observed has usual acted just kind of droopy. Which was the way I felt when they shoves a whole arsenal of guns in our faces and declaims that they've a good notion to shoot us for stealin' them critters, and demandin' what we've done with them.

"What you mean, stealin' critters?" Two-Ton demands, and, as usual, havin' made a good beginnin', he loses his voice and can't say nothin' more. But now, as usual, I've got command of the situation again, and swings on 'em right peevish.

"Yeah, what do yuh mean, accusin' us of stealin' cattle?" I demand. "But I suppose you boys mean well. Somebody is rustlin' the stock, you can see that. And we was chasin' them, and them shootin' at us, and then you came along and start shootin' at us too. And while we was tryin' to duck all that hail of bullets, looks like them rustlers have got away with the beef, all right."

Well, I wasn't none too hopeful about that line going over, but danged if they didn't believe us. Mebby the fact that the critters was

(Continued On Page 94)

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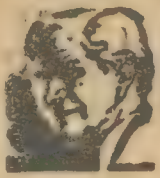

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gone had somethin' to do with convincin' 'em.

Anyway, the boss orders all of us to get going again and find the herd, and to kind of spread out so we could cover a lot of ground. Me and Two-Ton, we sure did like he said, spreadin' out and gettin' away from the rest of them without no loss of time. My idea wasn't to waste no time in lookin' for them critters, for I'd seen by then that those dogies was just plain bad luck for us, but Two-Ton, he had other notions, same as usual.

"We got to find 'em, dang it," he busts out. "Why, looks like them misguided hombres has kidnapped Anne, so's to make their get-away. We got to find them and rescue her."

"Me, I ain't lose no brindle-pelted woman," I retorts, but it's just that much wasted breath. When Two-Ton gets a notion, you might just as well try arguin' with a mule. They both got big ears and nothin' in between. So I kind of follers along, and as bad luck would have it, it ain't more'n ten minutes till Two-Ton gives a whoop and digs in the spurs in a wild dash forward, and I sees that, sure enough, the critters are mebby a quarter of a mile ahead, with Anne and them other hombres hustlin' 'em along with a single-minded purpose that sure ain't got nothin' to do with reachin' no north range. Seein' that now they're headin' west by south.

WELL, our heavin' over the horizon of a hill and bustin' down on them so sudden kind of takes 'em by surprise, and sorta makes them nervous as well. One or two bullets are tossed our way, but it's more in the nature of a warnin' gesture, like when a bumblebee on a thistle waves one paw at you, than anything else, and the rest of them are pullin' out fast and leavin' the critters to their own devices. All but Anne.

Seems like she's havin' troubles of her own, which for the moment I can't just figger out. Looks sort of like her cayuse, havin' feet near as big as Two-Ton and actin' just about as clumsy with them, has lifted a hind hoof too high and caught it in

her skirt where it flaps down loose from the saddle, and now she and the hoss are both tryin' to get untangled, but not seein' just eye to eye on how to go about it, are havin' a little trouble.

Anne, she's sayin' somethin' about that, if the horse wants to get in the saddle and ride, she'll get off and walk, but between jerkin' at the bit with one hand and accidentally spurrin' with the other foot, and tryin' to get down and stay in the saddle at the same time, it's sorta complicated.

Which don't worry me, for it ain't any of my business. But Two-Ton takes it to heart and thinks he ought to help out, and heads forward with that idea in mind. Me, I'd of pulled off to one side and let the misguided numbskull have his fun, but just then the other Crazy C boys heave in sight over the hill and head that way, and once again they're shootin' wild and careless. And seein' that we're right in line with them bullets, I rides along with Two-Ton.

By the time we come up with Anne, she's got off her horse, all right, and with her hair plumb wild and down over her face, she ain't my idea of beauty. Special as she dips a hand under her skirt, revealin' chaps and a gun-belt, and starts to come up with a six-shooter, and a plumb hostile look in her eye.

Not being blinded by love, like Two-Ton, I can read the signs plenty clear, and I don't like a six-gun pointin' my way, special with a nervous trigger-finger behind it. Seems like there's been too much of that sort of thing already tonight. So I acts, fast and sensible. I sort of lifts up and flops out of the saddle, throwin' myse'f on Anne and grabbin' for that gun.

Right then I have two pieces of luck, one good and one bad, and I ain't sure whether they balance up very well or not. I'm a mite slow, owin' to the fact that one foot kind of catches in my stirrup and I stumble, but Anne's gun catches in her skirt and so, before she can plug me, like I sees she's aimin' to do plenty enthoosiastic, I grabs for her gun-wrist with one hand and for her pelt

(Continued On Page 96)

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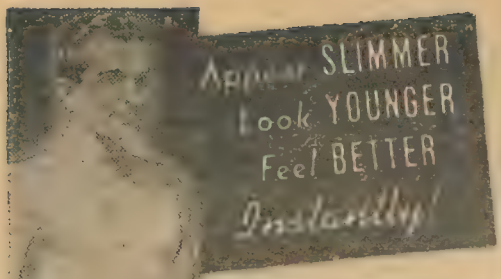

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(Continued From Page 95)

with the other. In my experience, there ain't nothing no better in a fight like that than some hair-pullin'. That is, when it's the other hombre's hair.

In this case, though, it don't work out none too well, for that hair is as elusive as a jumpin' frawg. I get hold of it, but don't seem to have nothin'. With the gun I'm havin' better luck, and sort of keepin' it from turnin' my way. Bein' capable of handlin' any situation that comes along, I'd of come out all right if it hadn't been for Two-Ton.

THAT misguided hombre has seen me grapplin' with his lady love, and whether he's jealous or suspects that I'm mishandlin' her, either way he's mad. He gallops up and leans over, outa the saddle, and bops me over the head with the bar'l of his six-shooter, plumb unfriendly-like, just as though I wasn't his pardner.

Which is plenty to make me let go of Anne, bein' that my hold was kind of slippin' anyway. By then, the Crazy C boys are comin' up fast and shootin' faster, and Anne, who's shed her skirt by now, makes a flyin' jump and gets on her hoss again, and lights out.

It's about this time, belated as usual, that Two-Ton begins to see that all ain't roses and romance here tonight. It sort of dawns on him that we're caught right in the middle of a cross-fire between them rustlers and the Crazy C, and that the Crazy C crew seems doubly convinced that we're workin' hand in glove with the rustlers. Which is sure a libelous slur on us, but it ain't no time to stop and argue about it.

Seein' at least that much of the trooth, Two-Ton keeps on ridin' off at a angle, and though I'm kind of woozy, I manages to get back on my own cayuse and follow. And danged if that crazy crew don't chase us till, as I finds out later, the others get plumb away with the critters.

It takes us quite a spell to shake them, though we fin'ly manages it in the dark. By then, both our horses are blowin' pretty hard, so it takes me mebby ten minutes to detect that

Two-Ton's sighin' just as gusty as they are. When I fin'ly sees the trooth, I inquires why, figgerin' he's reflectin' on the misspent weeks and the loss of what ought to have been our herd.

But as usual, both of us are wrong. Two-Ton turns and looks at me like a calf that's just popped its head out of a milk bucket, and sighs again, near blowin' my hat off my head.

"It's Anne!" he says. "Now I won't never see my dear girl again! Which is plumb heartbreakin'. But I could stand that if I just had some little thing—some little memento—to remember her by. Like a lock of that hair of her's!" And a tear splashes down his nose and makes a puddle in the road.

I opens my mouth to tell him that Anne ain't no dear, and to remind him that she's rooined everything for us. Likewise that she ain't no her, but a masqueradin' and plumb tough he. But seein' how woe-begone he looks, and knowin' it wouldn't be no use anyway, I reaches into my pocket and pulls out what he's sighin' for—not just a lock of her hair, but the whole danged wig of it, which had come loose when I grabbed, and helped spoil everything.

"Here," I says, "is the pelt, Two-Ton. I skelped her for you."

And Two-Ton, he's that ongrateful, he stares at it, then flings it back in my face. Yessir, pardners ain't no mixed blessing. Besides being ongrateful.

THE END

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TEN COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

ASK FOR

FAMOUS
WESTERN

THE KID COMES HOME

★ ★ ★ ★

By Leo Hoban

Young Bob Resented Being Told to Stay In His Own World—Until His Life Depended On It!

THE boy riding the Pinto down the street looked like a man and was trying his best to feel like one. He was 16.

The Pinto's hoofs made a soft, sucking sound in the mud as it loped past the false front buildings. It was pulled up to a halt at the sign reading *Apoecarie* where lamps in the early Fall dusk glowed.

The fact that the sign was misspelled, that the whole of the three streets comprising the town was not too urban, never entered the young ranny's head.

He was in town on important business—like getting a shave. And when you got a shave, Shella gave you that shave—and who was better than Shella who came from the East and who knew the world?

She painted her eyebrows and her lips and rouged her cheeks. She was beautiful in a funny sort of way. A way funny enough to make him get a shave he did not need every Saturday night. When the fuzz became a beard he would have to shave every second day himself. But in the meantime, Shella—on Saturday—was the world.

There were old bearded miners and curley-bearded cowpokes just in off the range who also came to see Shella. Some of them looked pretty tough and that was unfair to Shella for it made her seem tough, too. She certainly wasn't. Why anyone who could feel her soft hands on his face could tell that. She was wonderful.

Helen, on her gangling legs and with pigtails hanging down her back, came out of the store. She walked rapidly across the boardwalk and looked up at the boy.

"Coming in, Bob?" she asked, ineffectually hiding the eagerness in her voice. "The minstrels are in town. It's a good black-face show, I hear."

The boy pushed back his sombrero and looked down at her.

She was just a kid—didn't know what it was all about. She was far too young for him, a man who shaved every week. Why, in time she might be fifteen; and what was that compared with Shella. . .

"No, I have important business tonight," the boy said grandly.

The girl, taken aback, looked at him suspiciously. "Now lookit here, Bob Parker, you ain't doin' anything crooked, are you? Most honest folks don't do business on Saturday night.

"Me! Crooked?" the boy said. "Why, man alive, I never done anything crooked in my life. Child, just go to your show and let a man handle his work."

Helen's eyes blazed. "Don't call me child."

The boy drummed his feet against the Pinto's sides. "Go to your show—do all that kid stuff."

"All right you—you beardless wonder!" Helen screeched as the Pinto lazily moved up the street. "And don't you go gambling or anything foolish like that. You're not old enough to play a man's game yet!"

The kid rode up the street, smiling to himself. No answer was needed. She was too much of a child; she didn't know what she was talking about. He was a man and could

The sort of trouble the kid knew on the range was part of his world

handle a man's job now—a job, like Shella.

He tied the Pinto to the hitchrail at the side of the barbershop, and went around through the mud to the boardwalk. His hand, reaching for the catch on the door, halted involuntarily. It was ever thus when he entered Shella's shop. A semi-panic, half-doubtful, half-hopeful, that she would recognize him for what he intended himself to be—a man.

She was shaving Sheriff Carson, and that seemed odd, for Carson usually shaved himself. He took pride in his walrus mustaches and ordinarily wouldn't let anyone—least of all a lady—clip them. But, then, maybe he also liked Shella?. . . It was possible. . . For who could help but like Shella. . . She was such a lady. . .

(Continued On Page 101)

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The Kid Comes Home

(Continued From Page 99)

HE OPENED the door and moved self-consciously into the shop.

Shella looked up, made a brief gesture with her razor, said: "Hello, kid," and returned to work on Carson's face.

The kid hung up his hat, stretched his long legs, and tried to appear mature and worldly by nonchalantly rolling a cigarette with one hand, the way the cowpokes did back on the spread.

He watched Shella work, her razor making a loud scraping in the stillness of the shop. She seemed a little tense and nervous. The lines around her eyes were deeper tonight, and instead of being petite she seemed to be shrinking into an utter smallness as though trying to avoid some unseen evil. But she was a nice girl, even when she didn't feel so good. Any darned fool could see that. . .

Sheriff Carson got out of the chair and tossed a half dollar at Shella. She caught it in mid-air, her eyes wide with apprehension.

"Thanks, Sheriff," she said, and the way she said it was like a sound of utter relief.

The sheriff stared at her, pulled up his corduroy pants, took a hitch in his belt, and said: "Sister, remember what I told you." Then he put on his dust-covered hat, looked speculatively at the kid, and departed abruptly, slamming the door behind him.

The kid walked forward uncertainly and said: "Ah—ah, Miss—Miss Shella—I would like a shave."

She whirled from the side of the chair, her face going tight. "Now look, kid," she said, moistening her lips. "You don't need a shave. Skip it for tonight. Go to the show with the rest of the youngsters."

The kid's face hardened. "I'm no youngster. I'm, I'm—"

"To your own world, Bucko," she mumbled. "To your own world. . ."

"Now listen, Miss Shella, I need—"

"You need a good clout in the puss, you fat-headed twerp!" a voice said from the back of the shop.

(Continued On Page 102)

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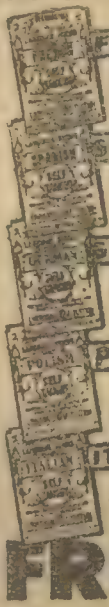

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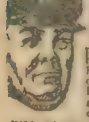

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 101)

"Ned—no rough stuff," Shella said. "This is just a kid with puppy-love ideas. He don't mean anything. Just let him go."

The kid studied the man. He stood, with gun in hand, in front of the curtains that covered the back end of the shop. He was small, wiry and dangerous-eyed. He did not seem to fit his western clothes. They hung loosely—and almost ashamedly—on his narrow shoulders. But the gun in his hand seemed like it had grown there. It was that natural to him.

"I'm not going to hurt the punk—as long as he behaves himself," Ned said through thin lips that hardly moved. "In fact he's just the kind of western yokel I need for this canter."

"Why use him?" said Shella. "He can't help."

"He looks strong, and he looks useful. On top of that he moved into something that the sheriff just thought he knew about. When this punk sat down in the barber shop tonight and saw that sheriff crack smart, he heard too much."

"The sheriff didn't say a thing," Shella said.

"He don't have to say anything. Do you think he was here for a Turkish bath?"

The kid stood there with mouth agape and anger slowly rising. . . Here he was facing a gun that was totally unexpected, and here was Shella, the wonder, talking to this gunman like he was her husband or something.

There just couldn't be anything between these two, for Shella was too wonderful for that. . . It just didn't make sense. . . None of this made sense. . .

"This is the payoff," Ned said. "I didn't want a witness, but now this bare-faced twerp comes in for a shave on the same night I was going to move the stuff and the sheriff gets suspicious. Well, the kid is going to help do it."

"Listen," Shella said, "he's just a button and don't understand. Don't get him messed up in this."

"He is messed. I can't load those ore sacks by myself. He's strong

and all of us will go together. The team is waiting up the hill. Given a good break we can get it to the smelter by tomorrow afternoon."

The kid's mind was in a whirl. A special trip to the smelter at Central City meant only one thing—rich ore, bearing heavily with gold.

BUT a phony westerner—neither cowpoke nor miner—with a gun in an adroit fist—and a lady barber who supposedly dealt only in lather and conversation—should have had no dealings in ore.

Ore belonged to the mine owners and those tough and embittered men who swung the picks and lifted the shovels in the depths of the mountains. The workers came in and got gloriously whiskeyed-up each week—and in the process were shaved.

That was it. . .laborers in gold mines getting shaves. . . That was it . . . Laborers uncovering a small piece of ore easily carried outside when heavily laden with a golden streak and disposing to an outside party. What would be more logical than a lady barber?. . .

They could simply sit in her chair, drop it in the pocket of her white smock, or just leave it in the shop. . . Oh, it was beautifully simple.

Only trouble was, she had to turn it over to someone else. Even when in selected specimens for richness, it made bulky matter. And it would take quite some time to assemble enough to send a load to Central City.

And Ned was unknown to the kid. Neighbor knew neighbor in such a small district. The gunman was a stranger; and strangers did not assemble a whole wagonload of rich ore overnight. . .

Ned made a quick motion with his gun and said, "Shella, close up the shop. Our horses are out back and the punk's on the side rack. We're all going to the cabin."

Shella hesitated, then went rapidly to the back of the shop.

The kid stood uncertainly, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot. He wondered what a man would do in a situation such as this.

(Continued On Page 104)

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 103)

He wished he had a gun, but guns in town on a Saturday night were regarded with impolite interest.

"Now lookit here, mister," the kid said, "I just came in here for a shave and—"

"And you got out of your own world, Kid," the gunman said. "Never grow too big for your breetches."

The words hammered against the kid's skull. "Your own world." Twice he had heard that expression within an hour. What was it Shella had said?

"Stay in your own world, Bucko." That was it.

Maybe that was it. Maybe that was how to get out of this jam. The eastern gunman—out of his world—and the western kid—in his world. . .

SHELLA came out of the back room, wearing a riding skirt and a man's coat tossed carelessly across her shoulders. Her face still looked drawn and the lipstick and rouge seemed grotesque and misplaced in the whiteness of her face.

It was Shella who brought the horses from in back while Ned stood by the kid and the Pinto at the side of the building. Ned had holstered his gun, and that affront galled the kid more than if the gun had been pressed to his back.

It was hard to be a man in a situation such as this. . .

The three rode abreast up the street and passed the theater. A black-faced barker was shouting the merits and three more men in cork black drummed their tamborines and lent hosanas to the accolade of the wonders inside at the start of the show.

The kid saw Helen, walking with two couples, and suddenly he felt a terrible aloneless. She did not seem such a child now—and around her was peace and serenity. The sort of trouble the kid knew on the range was part of his world—he didn't think of it now.

The trail they took surprised the kid. He had expected to cut to the South in the direction of the mines. Instead Shella led the way up the winding trail to the Northeast of the

town where nothing much existed save squatters hopefully awaiting a windfall.

But it was not a surprise when Shella pulled up outside the dark cabin of Clem Guilds, the sly-eyed and furtive town roustabout. It was logical to expect Guilds to be in an undercover business like highgrading.

Shella turned in her saddle and looked askance at Ned.

He simply swung down, jerked a thumb at the kid, and said: "It's time to go to work. The wagon needs loading. And barefaced boy, you're just the one to do it."

In the dark the kid could see Guilds' team of whites standing patiently to the rear of the log cabin.

There was only one answer to that. Guilds must have been expecting Ned to make an overnight ride to Central City. Urgency seemed to be keynoting this entire deal.

Shella dismounted and turned to Ned: "Where's Guilds?" she asked.

Ned shrugged his shoulders and said: "Inside—and where he belongs. He tried a fast draw—and he just wasn't fast enough."

The shadows of the pines could not obliterate the sudden whiteness of Shella's face.

"Why?" she asked.

"Ore and you," Ned said. "He wanted both. He couldn't see the three of us going away together . . . Neither could I. He had lived too long anyway. He used to get on my nerves at the Illinois State pen. He won't any more."

A CHILL, engulfing and drowning, washed over the kid. He knew now what he was up against—a cold-blooded killer. Ned had made his statement in a matter-of-fact tone, like killing a man was an everyday occurrence.

It was certain that after such a confession, and aiding Ned in the theft of the ore, he never would be permitted to remain alive to be a witness against Ned.

Shella led the way to the cabin, flung open the door, and went inside and lighted the kerosene lamp.

The kid followed reluctantly,

(Continued On Page 106)

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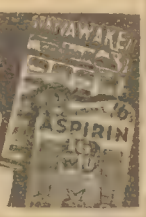

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(Continued From Page 105)

prodded now by Ned's gun in his back. He expected almost anything.

Shella's scream was cut off short. When the kid came slowly through the doorway she was standing with her fist to her mouth, staring at the corner.

Shella turned slowly and faced Ned. "You can't get away with stuff like this Ned. We'll never get clear. Westerners don't like murderers."

"Who does?" Ned said. "The kid here is going to take care of the body, burying it in a fashion. It won't be found until we've easily cleared Central City. That kill was worth about seventy thousand dollars. It was worth it."

"What about him?" Shella's voice was trembly as she nodded towards the kid. "You won't do that to him. He's a nice kid. He has crazy ideas—but he's a nice kid."

"Hell, I wouldn't do anything to him I wouldn't do to my own mother," Ned said, grinning. "And who would hurt a poor old soul like her?"

"You would," Shella replied.

"I did," Ned said.

THIS was like a nightmare to the kid. It was unreal, fantastic, but grimly and maturely so. He was to be killed as soon as he had accomplished Ned's purposes—first of loading the highgraded ore and then disposing of Guilds' body. That he would go into the same grave with Guilds seemed quite certain.

The cabin had a fireplace and over the fireplace on a deer's antlers was a shotgun. To the left of the shotgun were piled sacks of ore. Near the sacks were miner's tools and an opened case of dynamite.

The kid looked from the dynamite to Ned to the uncovered kerosene lamp.

"Okay, kid," Ned said, balancing the gun carelessly in his hand. "Let's load the wagon. Grab a bag."

The bags were heavy, back-breakingly so. Four times he staggered outside to the wagon and back again, with Ned, chuckling, following him.

Four times he passed Shella, her

(Continued On Page 108)

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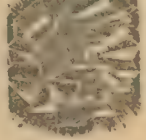

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(Continued From Page 106)

back grimly turned on the corpse and her eyes silently beseeching the kid to save both himself and—possibly her.

The kid wondered why she did not grab the shotgun when they went outside. But the courage and nerve for that seemed lacking.

It occurred to the kid that Helen—under similar circumstances—would not have lacked such courage. The minstrel show just must be about starting now. . . .

To your own world, Bucko, to your own world. . . .

The words kept beating with monotonous regularity through his head.

But he was out of his own world, in the world of a gunman from the East. He was helpless—and he knew it. How could he change those worlds and put a guttersnipe from the city streets on an even basis with a western kid? There was one chance.

He weaved past Shella, pulled an ore sack from the stack, turned—and fell sprawling over the dynamite box.

New was instantly alert. "Get up, you muttonhead!" Ned grated. "That wagon must be loaded in a hurry and Guilds there has—"

He never finished.

The kid had surged upright, two sticks of dynamite in his right hand. He leaned across the table until the sticks were within a fraction of an inch of the burning lamp.

Shella gave a throttled gasp and sagged weakly back against the wall.

Ned cursed, raised his gun, then hesitated as the kid said: "I know you're going to kill me. Shoot! We might just as well all go together."

Ned's eyes were riveted on the flame and the dynamite sticks. The eyes widened gradually until they fought to control panic.

"Drop the gun, or we all go to kingdom come," the kid said.

"Now look at it this way," Ned gibbered. "We can make a deal. There's seventy thousand dollars worth of ore there—and half of it is yours and—"

"Drop the gun!"

(Continued On Page 110)

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(Continued From Page 108)

NED looked at Shella, and she said through a tight mouth: "Drop it, you fool!"

The gun fell slowly from Ned's hand.

"Kick it over here," the kid said.

Ned's boot moved and the gun slid across the floor. "Watch that dynamite, dammit! Don't let us all go to Hell."

The kid's left hand swooped downward and came up with the gun. Confidence flowed through its butt, and he knew he had won.

Carelessly he threw the dynamite against the far wall, and Ned turned to flee. Shella screamed.

Nothing happened.

The kid chuckled, and backed to the door. As he passed the fireplace he took possession of the shotgun.

"C'mon, Miss Shella; let's go back to town," he said. "I'll see you home, and then I gotta date with a girl at the minstrel show. She's a right nice girl."

"What about me?" Ned yelped. "You goin' to leave me here with this?" He jerked his hand at Guilds' corpse.

"I reckon so. After all it belongs to you until Sheriff Carson comes up to get you both."

Shella led the way down the trail, and the kid on the Pinto led Ned's

(Continued On Page 112)

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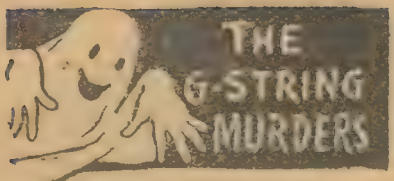

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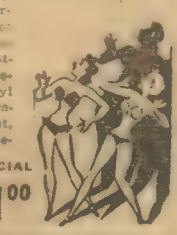

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 110)

horse. Ned still had a wagon and a corpse up there. That did not matter. He couldn't get away— The kid had turned the horses loose—No city man would be able to round them up in the dark.

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"I told you?" she said incredulously. "I didn't say a word."

"Yes you did, ma'am, when you told me 'to your own world, Bucko.' You see I got figgerin' that Ned, a gunman from the sidewalks, might not understand all about the West—especially dynamite. That was in my world. Why, lady, all dynamite will do in a fire is flash a bit. We didn't have a Peter's chance of being blown up. That stuff has to be capped."

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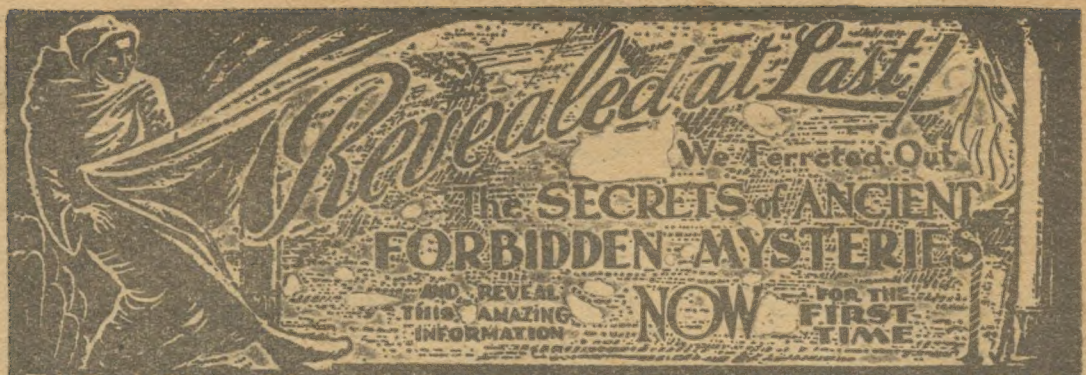

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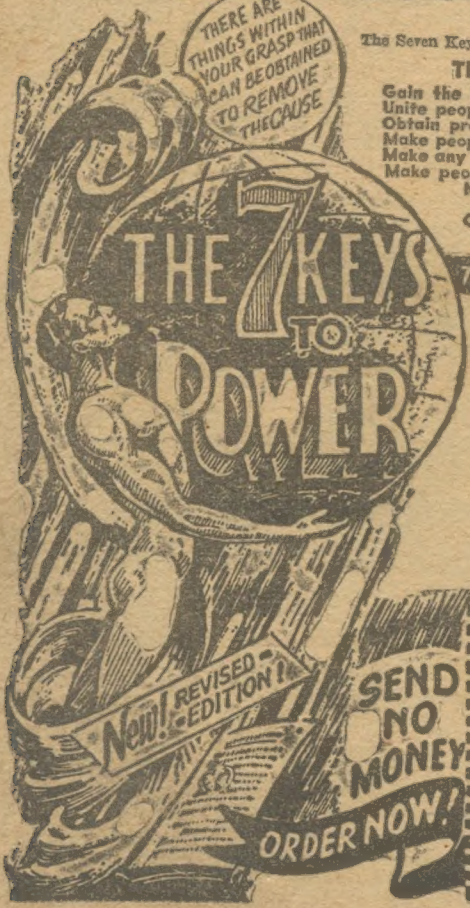

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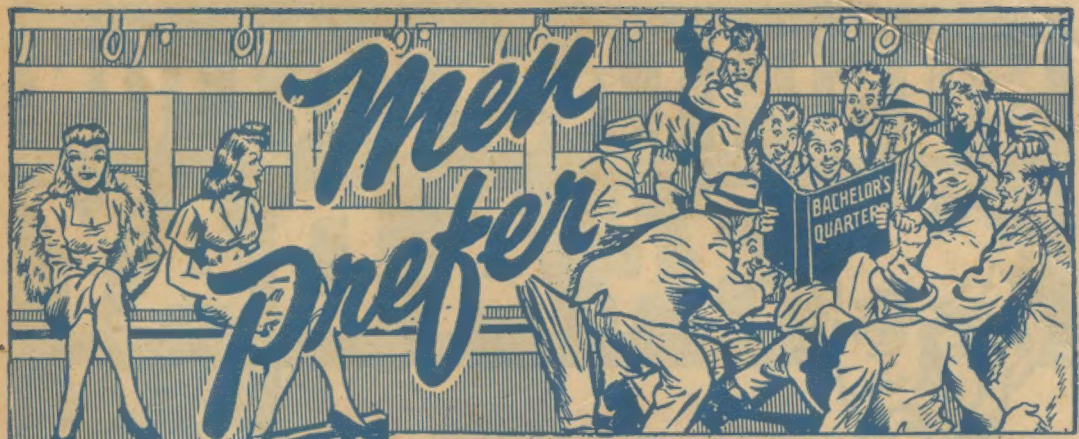

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